

## Valley of Serenity

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Characters:	<a href="#">Phil Watson (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Wilbur Soot</a> , <a href="#">Dave   Technoblade</a> , <a href="#">TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Clay   Dream (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Toby Smith   Tubbo</a> , <a href="#">Ranboo (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Liam   H Bomb94</a> , <a href="#">Cara   CaptainPuffy</a> , <a href="#">Grayson   Purpled (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Niki   Nihachu</a> , <a href="#">Floris   Fundy</a> , <a href="#">Alexis   Quackity</a>
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# Valley of Serenity

by [Interjection](#)

## Summary

After blowing up a nation, Wilbur throws a sword down at his father's feet and begs to be killed.

Phil, however, takes one look at the state of his children and decides he has other plans.

(post november 16th au where wilbur doesn't die. instead a family leaves the smp entirely, and learn how to live with each other again.)

"Fuck, I - I can't forgive either of you right now," Tommy says quietly. Despite the words, he hugs Wilbur tighter. "One day, though. I think one day I will."

"And we're still brothers, right?" Wilbur dares ask. Techno inhales sharply beside him.

They get a choked laugh in reply.

"Yeah. Brothers."

# beyond lies the refuse and regret of its creation

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

L'Manberg was a nation doomed to fall the moment Wilbur shoved aside a desperately pleading Tommy to accept the bundles of TNT and dynamite Dream had laid out like a godly blessing before him, mouth in a twisted smile and pupils too wide for any sane man. Fate carved as solidly as the scattered lyrics in the cave which housed that damned button and the damned madman who circled around it like a haunted specter.

The madman who had, ultimately, decided to blow up his symphony to a ruined, desolate end.

L'Manberg was a nation beyond saving, and it had been for a long time.

Phil firmly believes, however, that the madman in question is *not* beyond saving.

"Kill me, Phil, kill me-"

The sword clatters to the ground. Phil barely registers the blinding glint of diamond against harsh, judging sunlight.

He picks up the sword. Studies its tiny nicks and shimmering surface and well worn grip. He can tell it's a good sword, a reliable one.

The scent of smoke clings to their lungs, scratches their eyes. Whispers regrets of *too late, too late*.

Wilbur stares into the blade with a hungry expression, like that of a man who has nothing left to anticipate in his life but the release of death. His gaze shifts up to Phil after a shivering second, pleading, eager, his arms spread wide in invitation.

*Please, they all want you to, nothing would make me happier-*

Phil throws the sword clattering against the cracked and crumbling stone beneath them. It's kicked with an unexpected ferocity and skids away in spinning circles, eventually tumbling off the ledge they're standing on. After a few seconds, a faint splash echoes in his ears.

He barely registers the expression of shock and terror on Wilbur's face before he's cradling him against his chest, wrapping him in a tight embrace. Wilbur shakes and sobs in his grasp, more vulnerable than the day Phil had first found him wandering alone in the dark, dangerous world.

"You think I would kill my own son?"

The words come unbidden, and need no explanation.

Philza is a father. And he has failed. And he will make things right again.

~\*~

Slowly, he tugs Wilbur away from the ruins of L'Manberg. In Techno's base, he takes out a piece of crumpled paper and begins writing.

*Techno, Tommy. I'm taking Wilbur and getting us out of the Dream SMP. Meet us if you want to join. We'll leave in 4 days if you don't.*

Directions are scribbled on, and the paper carefully folded. He lays it bare in the hidden sugarcane chest he knows Techno will check when he returns.

Wilbur stands beside him, eyes hollow and head bowed. Phil places a hand on his shoulder and guides him to the bubble elevator.

~\*~

“Where are you taking me?” Wilbur asks, and the lilt of desperation in his tone suggests he still hopes his own father would drive a blade through his heart.

“Away,” Phil says quietly to him, trying to keep his own thundering heartbeats together. He guides Wilbur along, carefully. “Away from here.”

They travel until sunset, and to Phil’s immense relief, Wilbur doesn’t try to stop a single time.

~\*~

It’s in a birchwood forest, shadows rippling with the dusky sunset and swaying leaves, that they stop.

There’s a small wooden shelter deep within it, one Phil had built to keep out monsters for the night during his trip to Dream’s lands. When they step in the moon is already chasing starry constellations across the sky.

Phil takes out some wood and wool from his ender chest, fixes another rough bed for Wilbur, and tells him to sleep.

“Please, Wil,” he whispers when Wilbur stares at him blankly. He gently coerces him onto the fluffy wool.

Slowly, Wilbur takes off his boots. Lies down. Closes his eyes. Phil tugs the makeshift blanket he had made over him.

He thanks his past self for over-preparedness as he digs through his ender chest yet again, and finds slices of raw beef and bundles of carrots.

A small meal is made and eaten. Afterwards, he watches Wilbur sleep from the edges of his eyes as he paces dark lines in the rough plank flooring.

His son stirs fitfully in his sleep, gasped yells and convulsions and pleads for death interrupting every other minute. Eventually, it is all Phil can do to hum lullabies and whisper soothing reassurances while he holds Wilbur closer.

He doesn't sleep a single second himself for the entire night.

~\*~

On the 2nd day, Techno knocks on the door.

“Why?” Wilbur asks as Techno unclasps his cape of blood crimson and shrugs on the dark, woolen longcoat Phil offers him.

“They’re rebuildin’ Manberg,” is the reply. “Trying to on what’s left of it, anyway - can’t really call it Manberg anymore. Didn’t learn my lesson, and I’m not botherin’ to teach them again.”

Phil places a hand on his shoulder. Techno hesitates, the tip of his boot drawing thin, invisible strands before him.

“And - and you don’t need help there anymore,” he mumbles. “You’re here.”

“I’m here,” Wilbur echoes. Something distant clouds his eyes. “I’m here, and you’re here.”

“Yes, Wil. We’re both here with you,” Phil says. He sits down next to him, and envelops him in another hug. A few moments later, Techno does the same.

Wilbur closes his eyes as tears gather at their edges. Phil gently brushes them away.

~\*~

2 more days tick by, and Phil has given up on Tommy.

Perhaps some things can never be forgiven by some, he thinks as he packs up what few items are left. The burn scars running like tear trails across Tubbo’s body, or...

L’Manberg. Insanity. Devastation and craters and the ashen remains of emancipation. Forcing Tommy to choose.

To be the hero, and to lose it all... all over again.

With a heavy heart, he continues packing.

It is fine. He has three sons, two of whom are with him, and he will take care of them. Tommy has his own family and circle now.

As they prepare to leave the ramshackle shelter, Phil taking Wilbur’s hand and guiding him along-

“Wait!”

~\*~

“Child.” Techno rolls his eyes as Tommy proclaims his desire to go with them with nothing but a set of iron tools and a bag of food and water slung behind him.

Wilbur stares at Tommy like they’ve both become ghosts.

Phil is too busy fitting a long green coat over his son’s shoulders and smiling something too happy, too relieved, to take much notice.

~\*~

The world is a vast place, cycles of continents and oceans stretching further than most can travel in their lifetimes. Most people did not bother to travel in their lifetimes.

Phil, however, is not “most people,” and neither are his sons. Dream may have shut off End access in his kingdom and surrounding areas, but it’s hardly a monopoly. Those portals are scattered around the world, and Phil has conquered the infamously treacherous dimension in a way few can boast of.

“Put these on,” Phil says when they reach the end of a sheer, giant cliffside, the sharp, cool wind flinging his hair like strips of flags. He hands them each an elytra and a bundle of rockets.

Beyond them, a vast, open prairie stretches out, followed by increasingly dense forests. To the northeastern side he can make out the faint shape of pale blue mountains, immensely giant and imposing.

“Where are we going?” Wilbur asks softly.

“Far, far away, Wilbur,” Phil says. Something flutters in his chest - anticipation, maybe. A chance at fixing all this.

“Far, far away from here.”

## Chapter End Notes

Note that this is set in a universe that, while it has Minecraft elements like the End and Nether dimensions and some items from Minecraft, doesn't operate on its logic (ie no respawns, no carrying ridiculous amounts of items in an inventory, no weird health regeneration rules, no weird gravity, ect). Think of it as sort of a fantasy world, which includes animals, plants, and just generally stuff outside Minecraft.

I am a sucker for three things: Found family being family, running away to live on a farm, and GETTING SOME GODDAMN THERAPY. So these things will happen here, though the farm part will take another chapter or two to get going.

Also, I'm more used to writing in past tense so if you see any grammatical mistakes at all feel free to let me know and I will fix it! Aside from that, comments and constructive criticism are always welcome (I dearly hope I haven't made a huge mistake by starting another longfic).

# i heard there was a special place

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The mountain winds are cold. Harsh. Biting. Snowdrift cling to their boots more tightly than a zombie to the living, and any animals or forageable food are few and far between.

Phil is used to living alone amidst landscapes of duel beauty and danger, as breathtaking as they are precariously perilous - he thrives in such environments.

His sons can too. They have the skills, the power, the perseverance.

But he is not about to make things any harder than they have to be.

“Hey Phil! How long until we’re out of this hellhole?” Tommy wheezes slightly, and with a frown Phil pulls him closer. He scans the rocky landscape they’ve landed on, and hones in on a dark, shadowy spot nearby,

“A few more days, hopefully, as long as the winds are favorable,” Phil says. With his own large, feathery wings and knowledge of air currents, he could have easily made it through the massive mountain range in a week. Elytras are far less durable or easy to maneuver.

Once again, he thanks his past self for the massive quantities of rockets stored in his ender chest. And those 4 days in the birch forest had been spent gathering food and other supplies, utilizing the addition of Techno and Wilbur’s spaces as well.

“I hate this place,” Tommy declares as they boil a few squirrels and rabbits for dinner. His voice echoes off the cave they’d taken shelter in, rings of sound almost strong enough to brush Phil’s feathers. “It’s so fucking cold and wet and annoying.”

“Thank you for the astute observation,” Techno mutters.

“Oh, you’re one to talk-”

“Boys,” Phil says, and to his surprise they both fall quiet. Tommy even mumbles a “sorry” under his breath.

Years ago when they were all under his care just like now, Phil would have given just about anything to make them automatically stop bickering. Now, it seems they did with just a few weary words.

It’s strange. Unsettling, even.

Especially as Wilbur remains silent through all their exchanges.

~\*~

Tommy hates the mountains, and he hates leaving behind a Tubbo that refused to come with him, and he hates everything that happened during his last few days in the Dream SMP.

He hates the fires that rage behind his eyes when he sleeps and even in his waking hours, he hates the thundering rings of explosions that refuse to leave his ears, thrashing scars wide open across the land

of his mind, and he hates the shrieking whistles of fireworks as he's forced to open them in the air, or fall to his death.

He hates Eret for being the first betrayal, beginning Wilbur's spiral into distrust and madness, he hates Schlatt for taking away everything they had worked so hard to build and dangling it over their hunted heads, he hates Dream for encouraging and guiding and pushing Wilbur deeper and deeper into darkness for his own plans of chaos and power, wielding his position like a puppeteer with infinite strings.

But no matter how hard he tries, how much he wants to, how desperately he wishes it is true, Tommy can't hate Wilbur. And he can't hate Techno. And he can't hate Phil, even when he arrived too late to save them.

They're his family. They had been there for him when no one else had, all the way back when he was just a starving orphan on seedy city streets, lucky enough to catch Phil's attention.

It's widely said that Tommy is too clingy, is too naive, can't let go of things-

He hates how true the statement is.

~\*~

A few more days and not bitchy winds later, the edge of the mountain range was in sight.

"Finally," Tommy grumbles. He follows Phil's lead and swoops down through the canopy of a dark evergreen forest that crawls slowly up the final mountain's side. The familiar tang of tree bark and crunched pine needles swamp him almost immediately as the world plunges into shaded whispering, leaves rattling and ground soft with mulch and moss.

"Are we living here or what?" Tommy asks as Techno and Wilbur land nearby - Wilbur stumbling and Techno reaching out to steady him. "Better than the mountains."

"No," Phil says. "Just resting for a while. We need to save up strength and supplies."

"Where are we going?" Wilbur says softly, and Tommy nearly jumps in surprise. He hasn't heard Wilbur speak since that first dive off the cliff.

Which is rather fucking concerning, thinking about. He wasn't like that even in Pogtopia.

*Not your job to worry, Tommy reminds himself. Leave Dadza to fuss over him. You shouldn't care.*

"That's a good point. Where *are* we going?" Techno asks. "I'm down for traveling forever, but some of us don't have the patience for that."

Tommy expects that familiar spark of annoyance, the urge to challenge back - but it never comes. He merely continues to stare silently at Phil, awaiting response as well.

He wonders when this dullness within him began, and then why he can't bring himself to care about it more.

But it's fine. He still cares about other things, feels things. Nothing is particularly wrong. Tommy reassures himself with this mantra, and turns his attention back onto Phil.

"I was thinking... across the ocean," Phil says.



“Across the ocean?” Tommy asks, and suddenly he struggles to keep wide-eyed from his eyes.

“It would be a first for you, huh?” Phil chuckles. “The west one, obviously. I’ve taken Wilbur across once when he was really young. Met Techno there, actually.”

“But it’s - it’s so big.” Tommy struggles to keep the incredulousness out of his voice. “I don’t remember anyone who’s been there and back besides you three.”

“Oh, there’s plenty of people who have,” Phil says. “It’s not too difficult if you’re prepared and know the best path, which I doubt...”

He pauses, eyes darkening. Tommy thinks he sees a flash of raw, primal anger in his eyes before Phil returns to his usual bright self. It scares him.

It also makes him feel safe.

When did the two feelings begin clashing so much? Muddling in all the ways they shouldn’t? He knows it started further back than this.

“Which I doubt Dream does,” Phil continues. “Ideally, we want to be as far away from him and the rest of his people as possible.”

Tommy wouldn’t put it past Dream to spread wanted posters of them in his kingdom, that’s for sure.

Away. Far, far away from everything.

It sounds so... appealing, despite who he has to leave behind.

“And then?” Techno prompts.

“And then we find a place to settle,” Phil says. “At least for the time being. You guys will have to help me decide, of course.”

He holds out a hand, and Wilbur wordlessly begins to unclasp his elytra. A few moments later, Tommy and Techno follow his example.

Phil nods, accepts the elytras, and places down his ender chest. A few minutes later, tools in hand, they were preparing for the night.

~\*~

Techno stalks his prey with focus, and with strategy. With a quick slash, the deer is dead before it hits the ground.

Meat for the next few days, which is probably how long Phil will have them stay here - though Techno doesn’t particularly care, either way.

Sometimes, when those rare few that aren’t absolutely terrified of his presence find the motivation to talk to him, they will ask what Techno cares about. What he lives for, why he does the things he does.

And he will respond that he is the Blood God, and he needs nothing to care for but violence. It is true.

He never answers the question itself.

With heave, Techno swings the carcass over his shoulder and heads back for the shelter Phil and Wilbur are building. He eyes the surrounding trees as he walks, ears twitching faintly.

Hopefully, Tommy knows his way around forageables well enough to not poison them all. They have meat and vegetables stored in their packs and ender chests, but those are dried and prepared for long journeys, to be used only when no other options are available. The ender chests are cold, but not cold enough to prevent spoilage.

The shelter is being built faster than Techno expects, Wilbur lashing and nailing and binding the wood and branches with a methodical ease while Phil does various tasks around him.

They had all agreed to make it a treehouse high above the earthy floor, well out of reach of most monsters that stalk the night. They certainly all have the experience for it.

Phil taught them well. Techno feels a familiar, indescribable emotion as he watches his father and brother work.

He frowns.

“Got our meat,” he announces. Phil glances down.

“Cut it up a few paces away. No scavengers, remember?” he calls. A few moments later, a long slab of wood with a rope tied to the end tumbles onto the soft earth beside him. “Use this sled for transport.”

“Right,” Techno says. “Sled” is stretching it a bit, but it’ll get the job done.

He tosses the deer onto it and drags it for a few minutes to a nearby stream, waters rippling softly. The few beams of sunlight that manage to penetrate the forest roof dance like golden bees across its surface, and Techno can make out the shapes of various fish and crustaceans darting around.

Quickly, he begins butchering. Slice the belly, remove the organs, remove the head, peel the skin, carve the meat into manageable slices. Throw away what isn’t edible, save some bones for broth.

Eventually, he has several large chunks of meat, a pile of fur and tendons, a stack of bones, four cloven hooves, and a deer head. He debates whether or not to keep the head for a few moments before sighing and tossing it into the stream.

Techno is about to return to his family when a flash of silver scales drags his eyes back. It’s a school of fish congregating in the waters, swimming in circling frenzy beneath the floating pile of deer organs that Techno had left behind.

He quietly stalks over, careful to keep his shadow away from the stream's surface. Unslings the trident from his back. Aims carefully.

Strikes.

Wilbur loves the taste of fish.

Can't promise the next chapter to come as fast since school is starting again and they're not online because the administration is corrupt as hell, but I'll try to keep update schedules somewhat decent. And chapters will hopefully get longer eventually as well.

## **though our sunniest days were now stolen away**

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Wilbur stares at the three fish Techno throws down before him like he has been offered a plate of orphans instead.

Techno shuffles awkwardly, taking a step closer to Phil.

And Phil sighs, kneeling down to shake Wilbur's shoulder.

"Alright?" he asks, a double meaning question.

Wilbur slowly blinks.

"As much as I can be," he says. His voice is scratchy and hoarse. Phil bits his lip, but chooses to place his waterskin beside him and let the matter go.

He drags the fish over to the temporary cooking area they had set up, and nods to Techno.

Perhaps starting a fire and cooking with it in the tree house they're planning to sleep in isn't the greatest idea, but they are pressed for time and options. Besides, he trusts his experience enough to not screw this up.

He and Wilbur have reinforced the space rather well in the few hours, if Phil does say so himself. It's wedged high between 6 towering pine trees that have grown in a rough circle, the branches overlapping enough that with some well-nailed planks it can hold all their weight, supplies, and more without worries of stability. More planks and branches had then been overlaid along the gaps between the trees to block out most of the wind, and above them in a slanted position to run off any rain.

Phil has also gathered several large, flat stones and many smaller ones, making a campfire in the corner that he is reasonably sure will not set the forest alight. It's a gamble he is willing to take, with how cold the nights will get and how hated fire is by the monsters that roam the land.

"Techno," he says. "Start butchering. Some meat and fish for all of us - I'm going to find Tommy."

He isn't that worried, really, about where his youngest has gone. There is still an hour or so left until the night's darkness truly comes, and he has instructions of staying near the stream to prevent getting lost.

The gods know how much Tommy enjoys pushing his luck, however.

(Though maybe that's not the case anymore. Who's to say how much any of his children have changed? Certainly not Philza, with his failure to be there for them when they needed him the most.)

But. Just in case. He has been told to not stray too far, after all.

Phil stretches out his wings, and flies.

The forest is beautiful, he thinks as he calls Tommy's name. The sharp freshness of pine needles is more distinct among the sea of branches that he weaves through with practiced ease. Birds of woodland colors flutter amongst them, calling to each other with whistling songs of the coming night.

The denseness of the trees stretch on in every direction, eventually ending in curtains of foggy shadows. The floor below races by in greens and browns and mottled reds, twisted mushrooms and curling ferns.

Phil takes some moments to appreciate the dappled sunlight falling in scattered stripes and spots across the forest. It reminds him why he chooses to settle and live in the places he does.

Suddenly, a familiar fluff of blond hair catches his eyes, and he twists downwards.

"Tommy," Phil says as he lands next to him. Tommy turns and blinks, shaded beneath a particularly tall pine. Two basketfuls of mushrooms and wild greens are on a bed of moss beside him.

The husk of a small bee is in his hands, his fingers rolling it softly back and forth.

"Tommy," Phil says again gently, and Tommy lets it go. The bee drops into the soft earth without a sound.

"Sorry," he mutters. He picks up the baskets.

Phil doesn't say anything. What he knows are only vague recollections and offhand remarks that have already gone through the grind wheels of assumption.

*You have no right to take them away, let alone talk of such things,* a voice whispers in his mind.

Tommy is still looking at him, and so, Phil resolves to push such doubts away for now.

Silently, he guides Tommy back to their tree house.

~\*~

They eat their meal, a soup of venison and fish and whatever Tommy has picked. Cooking went smoother than expected.

Techno watches Wilbur bite and swallow pieces of fish without question, and feels a strange sense of relief.

When he is done with his own dinner, he places his bowl in their corner designated for such and takes out a bundle of crossbow bolts from the ender chest Phil had set down. The crossbow itself is already next to him, and his trident sheathed firmly on his back.

"I'm taking the first watch," he announces, and no one disagrees with him.

~\*~

The night is silent, save for the occasional rattling of bones in the darkness, or the piercing screeches of what Techno can only assume is some unlucky animal meeting its end at the merciless jaws of one predator or another.

Their walls are fitted well, tightly, and he feels drafts only from the small round window and tiny peepholes Phil has carved out.

Occasionally, he breaks the monotony himself by turning to observe his sleeping family for a few moments, bunched tightly together amidst fur and woolen blankets. Tommy and Wilbur both thrash erratically, each mumbling pleas for their own kinds of horrors, and Phil seems to have some subconscious instinct to pull them closer during these episodes.

Techno himself often feels the need to sleep. But rarely does he give into those feelings, and never does he allow them to bother him. The realm of sleep seldom wishes to claim him anyway.

Sometimes, he wonders if there is something broken in the way he pushes through that yawning fog and grips unyieldingly onto the waking world. If he has shattered the connection beyond repair and this is a punishment in its own right. It is fitting, yet another consequence of his hubris.

The gods know he already has so many.

He contemplates the whole idea as Tommy breaks into a quiet sob, grasping helplessly in the shadow of nightmares, and Phil rolls closer to him.

Throughout the watch, he hears only one hissing scratch close to the tree house. He angles his ears, aims into the darkness below with his crossbow, and shoots.

The faint crunch of metal-tipped bolt smashing into exoskeleton is heard. After that, silence.

About 3 hours after he first began watching, when the fire has died down to crackling embers, Techno wakes Phil up. He unslings his trident and gives it to him, nodding at the crossbow and bolts still lying beneath the window.

An agreement passes between them as they glance at each other, and then at Tommy and Wilbur shuddering in the empty space Phil left behind.

Techno walks over and lies down in that space, draws the blankets over his shoulders, and closes his eyes. He feels Tommy pressing closer, and tries his best to stay still.

He does not fall asleep.

~\*~

Some time later, Phil nudges him. Techno carefully stands up, steps over to the window, and watches Phil dig himself beneath the blankets. The tiny fire is burning brighter than before.

He does not wake Phil again for the rest of the night.

(They keep this arrangement for the rest of the time they are there. Neither Tommy or Wilbur mention it.)

~\*~

For the next few days, they prepare.

Techno hunts some more, deer and rabbits and the occasional goose falling before his sword and bolts. An odd raven here or there, for the glossy feathers and sharp beaks, or a tender pheasant when he gets lucky.

The forest is full of foxes as well, darting among the bushes and ferns and patches of tall grass. After a few moments of deliberation when he had first spotted one creeping about, Techno commits to scaring all of them away from the tree house the best he can.

He skins his catches by the stream, dragging back all the meat and fur and feathers.

He makes sure to spear a fish as well.

Phil is arguably the busiest of them all. He sets aside portions for their next meals and smokes the rest of the meats dry. He tans the furs the best he can, storing the other useful parts, while Wilbur helps under his direction. A pile of bolts and arrows also begin to pile within Techno's ender chest space.

They can't grow things in the time they have, but Phil is adamant about fiber in their diet and sends Tommy out to collect anything edible he comes across. After the first 2 days, when they have more meat than they can store and too much fur and feathers to have more use, it's decided that Techno will join him.

Tommy stares at him with a mixture of emotions when Phil announces the plan, very few of which Techno has the ability to understand. Among what he *can* pick out, however, are the flecks of resentment in his younger brother's eyes, and the hard, drawn line of apprehension in the way he presses his lips.

If any trace of that former adoration Tommy once held for him is left, Techno cannot detect it.

Another strange feeling curves, bending impossible shapes within him. Techno doesn't know how to address that either, so he defaults to his usual solution of ignoring such feelings. It's a solution that has worked so far.

He slings a pair of baskets over his shoulders.

"Let's go," he says, and watches as Tommy nods stiffly.

They don't talk while gathering forage. Techno has grown used to other people starting conversations for him, painfully aware of his own inability to do so.

Tommy's responding silence, however, is almost jarring.

Almost. Techno refuses to allow anything to truly surprise him.

~\*~

When a few days have gone by and the space in all their ender chests are packed as full as possible, Phil closes it for the final time in the forest. He turns the lock that shrinks it down to the size of an apple and slides it deep into the satchel he carries.

Dawn is approaching rapidly, alighting the forest in a soft, warming light. It burns against Techno's eyes as he pries open the door, glances outside, and signals that they're clear.

A few moments later, four dark shapes are gliding beneath the clouds, high above a sea of pointed pine green swaying with the mountain winds.

What can I say I really like writing nature scenery.

Alright, another short chapter! The next one will be longer, I promise. It will also take longer, definitely. Lol.

Comments and feedback are always appreciated, though of course no pressure. Thanks for reading!



# make you cry, say goodbye

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The ocean is endless, and deep, and filled with more shades of blue than Tommy could have ever imagined. He wonders how Phil remembers where to go, how he can point to a direction and say "that way" with such confidence.

Hypocritical, coming from him. But that is the way things are, and Tommy wants to know.

*He ignores the ache in his chest that flares as he thinks so.*

Flying is silent, save for the occasional rocket when the air currents let up, and Phil's steady wingbeats. Any attempts at conversation are thrown and stretched by the streaming wind, voices intangible to the ears of others.

Tommy hates it. He also refuses to let it bother him.

When the sun is just barely dipping the horizon, a wall of cliffs comes into sight. Islands of green and gray have passed below them before, but none as massive as this.

Phil makes a motion and veers to the left. Tommy narrows his eyes, angles his elytra (which he has gotten quite good at, if he does say so himself), and follows.

The cliffs slope down into gentle hills as they circle around the island, and eventually flattens into stone beaches, a plain of flat, weathered gray. There's buildings there - lots of them, Tommy realizes, built from strange combinations of stone, brick, and wood. One looms above the others, taking up the center with a giant bell tower that reaches into the sky with a red tipped roof.

It's a town. Not big enough for a city, but still a town of considerable size. People hurry through the cobbled streets, tinier than ants from the sky view above. Nearing the shore, ships of all sizes are woven among docks and piers that run out into the ocean. Seabirds swarm the entire area with a raucous cawing.

Phil points to one of those piers, bustling with people and stalls. He angles his wings, and they continue to follow.

Tommy eyes Wilbur as they descend.

He's followed all of Phil's directions so far with an emotionless stare, like a soldier that has forgotten his reasons for fighting, but continues nonetheless in a mindless directive.

It fucking creeps Tommy out. Wilbur has always been the most creative, most *emotional* of them all. He feels and thinks and creates with a depth few can match, throws himself deep into visions of ideals with an unlimited passion. It's his greatest strength, and as L'Manberg has proved, his greatest weakness.

The husk Tommy sees holds none of that, and he's not sure whether it's any better than the version of Wilbur he dealt with before, laughing with maniacal craze amidst Manberg's blown up rubble, begging his own father to end his life. There's a dullness to the eyes that once held the world's fire flaring within them.

Tommy blinks, and realizes there's stained wooden planks rushing up to meet him.

"Careful," Phil says, steadying his landing with guiding hands.

"Where is this?" he manages to ask, boots thumping on the wood with dull clunks. "Who the hell sets up a town on a random island in the middle of fucking nowhere?"

He gets a few dirty looks from passerbys, in addition to Phil's reprimanding look.

"Try to keep it down, okay?" Techno says flatly. "We need supplies and rest, and we look weird enough already."

Something twists inside Tommy, not quite guilt and not quite indignance.

"Fine," he mumbles, and resolves to stay silent.

~\*~

Phil has in his possession, among many things, copious amounts of money. Cut emeralds and gold coins will usually net something in any country or city-state or independent village, but they have plenty of things to trade even if the residents don't accept that form of currency.

Which they do, he reminds himself.

"Techno," Phil says. He takes out a pouch of coins and emeralds from his bag and holds it out. "Anything you think will be useful, get it. I trust you'll use your best judgement."

Techno nods, taking the pouch and sliding it into an inner pocket of his long coat.

They would have to wash those coats soon, Phil thinks. There is dried blood on both his and Techno's still.

He is thankful, however, that the blood crimson cloak is stored away in his ender chest. If he pines upon seeing it, then whatever Tommy or Wilbur feels must be so, so much worse.

"Where are you going?"

"To find a place for the night," Phil says. "Stay around here, and I'll come get you soon."

He places a hand on Wilbur's shoulder, gives Tommy a nod, and steers them towards the town proper.

~\*~

They receive some strange looks, mainly directed at Phil's wings, jet black with spots of white near the bottom in a color pallet which matches his cloak - but the town is one founded on trading routes, and so has learned to not ask too many questions about strange creatures when they bring with them money.

A few residents even seem to remember him, signaling so with a quick nod or wave. Phil waves back to them as he tries to recall the route to the inn he has stayed at the past few times he made a cross ocean journey.

They reach it eventually, a large establishment bustling with activity. A sign spelling *Pause and Unpause* in cheery red paint hangs above the mahogany doors. Phil opens it just as a woman also does

so, and they both hastily step back.

"Sorry, go ahead," she says with a gesture. "The routes 'ere are long, so you must be tired."

"Thank you," Phil says as he pushes Tommy and Wilbur through. "It wasn't too bad for us. I hope your ship made it alright."

"That obvious, huh?" she chuckles. She takes off her dark blue cap, pressing it against her vest. "What gave it away?"

"You reek of salt and fish," Phil admits.

"That I do," she laughs. "Crew just stoppin' for some supplies and good food. Long fishing trip. We were plannin' to swing by the Dream Kingdom waters for a bit, but those plans 'ave been stoppered. Probably not wise to go there right now, 'case you were thinkin' of headin' there."

"Oh, thanks--"

"Why?" Tommy asks, poking his head back out. Phil takes a deep breath, but doesn't stop the inquiry.

"Somethin' somethin' about a new king and war and a place being blown up," she shrugs. "Not sure on the details, but what we do know's that the political situation's hotter than a whale's tongue. The Dream's orderin' random searches of vessels in his waters. Very paranoid, that Dream is. Miss the previous one."

"I see," Phil says carefully.

"What about - about the new nation?" Tommy asks. "L'Manberg."

"That was the war?" the ship captain frowns. "They got a new leader now, President... Toby or somethin'. That place runs through leaders like I run through our whiskey supply. The perils of new nations, I suppose. Always so unstable. Apparently the Dream's not happy with it - havin' territory disputes already. Like I said, best avoid the situation for now."

"The victims of war are always those most undeserving of it," Phil agrees, watching Tommy open his mouth again.

"Excuse me, can you two stop blocking the doorway?"

Phil steps back and apologizes as two men shoulder their way past them.

"Well, I wish you safe travels," he says to the captain when they've passed.

"And you too." She tips her cap, and strolls off to disappear into the street of bustling people, all hasenting their activities with the arriving twilight.

"Tommy," Phil says as he guides him and Wilbur inside the inn. The smell of chicken soup and rosewood hits him immediately.

"But I need to--"

"Tommy, listen to me," Phil says softly. He leans down. "You make the decision you think is best, and I won't stop you. All I ask is that you take tonight to consider things and tell us. And - and please think your plans through."

Tommy flinches. Looks up.

His eyes are locked with some sort of determination. Towards what, Phil doesn't know.

"I..."

"Tommy," Wilbur whispers. Tommy stiffens. Phil leans forward and places a hand on both their shoulders.

Wilbur blinks, and for the first time since he carried him away from the ruins of Manberg, Phil sees a spark of intention in his eyes. "Tommy, please. Think about this."

"We can help you plan," Phil adds. He takes a deep breath, trying to stifle the painful feeling inside him, like his heart and lungs are being squeezed to bursting.

Tommy is silent for a long moment, glancing between him and Wilbur. A litany of expressions flash across his face - desperation, fear, anger - all of which lead back to uncertainty.

Phil keeps quiet as Tommy paces a few steps. His youngest has grown, and he has matured. He has to let him make his own decisions now, against the ache that's growing inside him once again.

"...alright," Tommy finally says. "Alright."

Phil manages a weak smile. Next to him, Wilbur shifts quietly.

~\*~

Techno feels the pouch of money press coolly against his ribs through thin linen as he glances around the pier. The ocean winds batter his long, swaying hair back and forth and everything smells of salt and seaweed. It's familiar, yet new - he hasn't been around coastal communities in a while, and each one always seems to have their own unique flair.

Beyond the crashing of waves against the shores and ships, and the squacks of seabirds scavenging, the call of various vendors sound louder than any conversation. Techno takes a deep breath as he considers his options.

"Fried lamb chops, delicious and filling!"

"Fresh fish! All regional species in stock!"

"Exotic plants from all over! Nightmare darkflowers! Jardonian mourning vines! Azalea saplings!"

He briefly considers the benefits of a flower farm before discarding the idea. It's probably not the most... useful hobby, to entertain right now. There's a nearby stall with various blades laid out on a purple cloth, and Techno begins to make his way towards it.

"Moobloom bulbs!"

He freezes.

*Moobloom bulbs.*

His feet turn.

The vendor flinches as Techno stares into him.

“How in the world did you get here so fast?”

“How much?” Techno asks, ignoring the question. “For the moobloom bulbs.”

The vendor perks up immediately. “2 gold pieces per bulb! Standard size.”

“Expensive,” Techno notes.

“Well, they’re very rare,” the vendor says. “And it takes a lot to keep ‘em in prime condition, you know. These just got shipped here too!”

Phil would want him to barter, to lower prices, but Techno is already feeling that familiar tingle of dread crawl down his spine at the thought of further conversation. He takes out the pouch and pulls out a large, shiny emerald.

“How many can I get for this?” he asks. The vendor’s eyes widen, and he leans over to examine the gem.

“It’s not often people buy with these around here,” he whispers. “So clearly cut too... 10 bulbs for that.”

“Deal,” Techno says. He slides the emerald over. It’s immediately snatched up, and after a bit of rummaging 10 moobloom bulbs, yellowed with faint streaks of pink, are placed on the table in front of him.

“A wrapping too,” Techno says as he examines them. “And a replacement for this one. It’s dead.”

He’s met with a grumble, but a few moments later he has 10 moobloom bulbs bundled in crinkly white paper.

15 minutes later, Techno also has several new knives of various shapes and sizes, 3 pairs of woolen socks and gloves, the giant text that is *Flora of Novixl* by The Novixl Guild of Scientists, and a glossy leather satchel to store it all. It’s of a similar style to Phil’s, a messenger bag Techno slings to his side as he eyes the small market for any final items.

He’s about to leave when a seagull flutters in front of him, and he remembers.

*Writing.*

They have feathers (so many feathers), but they lack ink. It isn’t particularly hard to make themselves, but good ink takes time and resources.

After some awkward inquiries, he learns there’s a small shop selling various writing paraphernalia a little ways from the pier.

"Hello, traveler," is the greeting when Techno opens the door. He blinks, and steps over to the counter.

"I just need writing ink," he says. "Squid or carbon."

His eyes trail to a collection of leather bound books behind the shopkeeper.

Not books, he realizes as he takes in the patterns of colorful flowers and clouds and wavy splashes. Journals.

"I bind them myself," the shopkeeper says, grinning as she follows his gaze. She waves a hand, marred with splotchy black stains. "40 years of experience. These are some fine journals, if I do say so myself."

Techno glances down at his bag, and thinks of the flower bulbs packed inside. Of ripped songs and scribbled notes and crossed out declarations written with faded elegance across crunched, burned pages.

"I'll take two as well," he says. "The yellow one, and that flower one."

The shopkeeper smiles.

"You can tell a lot about a person not just by what they write, but also what they write with," she says as she gathers his purchases. Techno remains silent as he pulls out a handful of gold coins.

"Whoever this one is for, I hope it brings them solace."

Techno dumps the coins onto the counter, takes the ink jars and journals, and stiffly turns around.

There's a reason he hates social interaction.

~\*~

Phil doesn't question anything as Techno shows him the purchases. He merely nods, and guides him back to the inn.

~\*~

"Large room for four," Phil tells the innkeeper. "Good evening, Vixella."

"Been a while," she agrees. "And who might they be?"

She nods at Wilbur, Techno, and Tommy, all three of which were standing behind him with various degrees of awkwardness.

Phil hesitates for a moment before replying. "My sons."

"You have children? How did I never know?" Vixella writes something down in a notebook. "You know, they somehow manage to both look like you and not like you at the same time. Room 9, by the way. Near the back hallway."

"Just never came up, I suppose," Phil says. "Thanks."

"No problem," she says. "Have a nice night!"

~\*~

Tommy can't sleep.

It shouldn't be all that surprising, really. But still.

His thoughts always wander back to when he decided to leave with Phil. When he was stuffing various items into his backpack, and then running as fast as he could, directions already memorized from the hours he had spent staring at the note with an agonizing feeling smoldering inside of him.

When he was asking Tubbo, again and again, to come with him.

*"Phil will accept you. He can keep us safe!"*

*"With Techno and Wilbur?"*

*"They - they didn't used to be like this. They won't be anymore. Not without all this power nonsense."*

He believes it. He doesn't know if he can forgive it. The idea makes him seize, lungs collapsing.

*"Power nonsense... I'm sorry this has taken so much from you, Tommy. But L'Manberg needs me. They need a leader that won't bail, or corrupt everything. A leader that actually means to help. If I suddenly leave, the nation will completely crumble."*

*"Get someone else-"*

*"There is no one else, Tommy. No one the citizens will put their trust in, and they've already had their trust broken so much. I can't do that to them too."*

*"Don't you want to be safe? And free?"*

*"I do, Tommy. But I can't just think of myself..."*

*"..."*

*"...I didn't mean it like that! Sorry, Tommy, I just - I think you should go. You should... go with them. Philza."*

*"You don't want me to help with rebuilding?"*

*"I think - I think it would be best for you to stay away from here for the time being. Your family needs you more than L'Manberg."*

Do they? What does Tommy give, really? Shouldn't he be in L'Manberg, supporting Tubbo's presidency?

Dream is pushing things again. Tommy isn't surprised, not with his past record, though he wonders who he decided to replace Eret with. The Dream Kingdom's mysterious puppeteer rulers have always had an infamous power addiction, though Dream - this one - is apparently doing things much more strategically than his predecessors.

*"I think they need you more than I do."*

He tries not to scream, forcing his throat silent in the absolute darkness.

*"Think plans through."*

A deep breath is taken, muffled into the blankets.

Tommy can do that. Contrary to popular belief, he can do that. He'll prove it.

What can he bring to Tubbo? To L'Manberg?

Battle skills. That has always been his biggest strength - he isn't Techno, but he has trained under both him and Phil. He's one of the best fighters in the world, and he knows that isn't an exaggeration.

He can fight for Tubbo. Whatever war will happen, he will-

Tommy stiffens in his bed.

He'll what? Charge at Dream's massive army alone? With a ragtag group of weary soldiers tired of war and destruction, and who would rather defect back to the Dream Kingdom than stay any longer in a nation built and torn and rebuilt by war?

Tubbo will avoid war. He isn't Schlatt with careless disregard, isn't Wilbur with burning, fiery ideals of freedom at all costs. Tubbo's goal has always been the wellbeing of those he cares about, and now that extends to all of L'Manberg.

Which means no war. If it comes to it, Tubbo would rather surrender than doom them all to death.

*"Those who would give up liberty for safety deserve neither."* Techno had uttered those words as the revolution streamed into Manberg lands, eager to topple Schlatt's administration once and for all. They had agreed, all of them, including Tubbo.

Turns out, everyone has vastly different ideas of what "liberty" and "safety" mean. To Tubbo, liberty includes having a life.

Includes the people of his nation having a life.

What can Tommy bring to that? Dream already holds enough disdain for him. He'll be of no help diplomatically.

What can - what can Tommy bring to Phil, Wilbur, or Techno?

*"Gosh, Tommy. Stop being so clingy to everything!"*

A feeling akin dread frosts in his stomach, but sharper and icier - more unforgiving. Visions flash behind his eyes - explosions and hatred and betrayal and distant, broken sobbing.

He suddenly feels like throwing up.

And he remembers, now, why he doesn't like thinking things through.

Tommy closes his eyes, grips his blankets, and goes back to chasing sleep.

~\*~

When Phil wakes he sees Tommy snoring softly in the bed, and an indescribable feeling of relief settles in his chest.

"Still here?" Techno asks, obviously thinking the same thing. He's writing something on a table, in one of the new journals he had bought. Phil wonders if he got any sleep at all.

Another failure on his part. But he can't push it right now.

"We don't give him enough credit," Phil says, nodding.

"No, you bitches don't," Tommy grumbles from under the covers.

After a moment, he kicks them off and drags himself up .



Phil smiles, and reaches over from his own bed to tousle his hair. "Good morning."

Tommy straightens slowly, rubbing his eyes. There's traces of shadows beneath them, Phil notes with that previous relief sinking a bit.

"I'm-" Tommy pauses, and glances at Wilbur.

Phil follows his gaze to his eldest, unusually calm as he lays motionless on the fourth bed. There's faint breathing, the occasional spasm, but a strange lack of presence. Like a ghost occupies the space, and has for a while.

Hesitantly, he reaches over and nudges Wilbur's shoulder.

It takes a few minutes for him to fully awaken, like sleep has drained more life from him. Phil doesn't miss the concerned glances both Techno and Tommy throw their way.

Once again he finds himself wondering how it all went so wrong from the content, not perfect but certainly not *broken* family they had been not even five years before.

When they're all fully awake, Tommy takes a deep breath and begins.

"I'm staying with you guys."

Phil's first reaction is a nod. He blinks, catching himself.

He should be happy, but an uncomfortable, scratchy feeling circles its barbs inside of him. Tommy seems so... resigned. *Defeated*.

It all feels so wrong.

He looks at Tommy's tired eyes, and leans forward.

"Are you - are you sure this is what you want?" he asks, ignoring the dread that pools in his stomach. "I know you and Tubbo are close. I don't want you to feel pressured-"

"I'm sure," Tommy says quietly. "Tubbo's president now. He can't - we can't put each other above everything else anymore and it's not fair to make him choose. I don't want to give him more things to worry about."

*It's so uncharacteristic*, is what Phil thinks. *But I don't really know him anymore, do I?*

He exhales quietly. Something inside him settles, and he wonders if he should feel guilt for presenting the option in the first place. And for, despite everything, the silent flare of rejoice at the idea that all his sons will stay with him.

"I have something to give you," Techno suddenly says. He reaches into his new satchel and carefully pulls out a wide, flat box.

Tommy takes it, and opens the covers. Despite not being either the giver or receiver, Phil feels another twinge of anxiety.

"Moobloom bulbs," Techno says as Tommy continues to stare. "For when we... you know. I don't know whether it's good or bad timing that I bought 'em when I did, but..."

Tommy swallows, and nods.

“I - I like it,” he says like it pains him. “The flowers. And growing them. Maybe we can have a bee farm eventually.”

“That could be arranged,” Phil agrees. He glances out the window, morning sun barely halfway above the horizon. “Shall we get breakfast, then?”

“One more thing,” Techno says. He reaches into his bag again, and pulls out a pale yellow notebook. There’s faint white clouds billowing across it, a pastel of peaceful colors. “Wil, you left your - your journal in Pogtopia. It was too ruined to read or write in, so I figured you might want a new one.”

Wilbur stares blankly at the journal Techno offers him. And continues staring.

And staring.

The pain inside him is back full force again. Phil wonders if he should reach out, intervene, *do something they’re your sons-*

“Wil,” Techno says, shoving it closer. A rare note of desperation leaks into his voice.

Slowly, Wilbur reaches out and takes the journal.

“We have lots of quills, and I got ink too,” Techno mumbles as Wilbur brushes a hand over the cover.

“Thanks,” he whispers back, so softly Phil could barely hear him. Techno’s shoulders relax the tiniest bit.

“Right! I’m getting breakfast first, losers. Bye.” And with that, Techno is gone and the door is swinging open.

Phil tries not to look too relieved as he ushers Tommy and Wilbur out after him. But a warm feeling curls around in his chest for the rest of the morning.

~\*~

Summer is ending fast. Phil hopes they can reach the coast within a month, giving them time to prepare for winter - Novixl’s winters, especially in the northern areas of the continent, are harsh and fierce. They all understand the urgency.

So a few hours later, they’re in the air again.

## Chapter End Notes

It's past my bedtime and I've only proofread this once rip. (As always comments are appreciated, though no pressure!)

And what can I say, I really like worldbuilding (I hope the made up names aren't too intrusive, but places and things and people gotta be called something and I tried my best to give them a Minecrafty vibe while also being a plausible name in this universe.)

Every time I plan for something to take up a chapter it balloons into 3 chapters. What is this sorcery.

Rest assured that though it may be a while, we have not heard the last of Tubbo and Dream either. (I quite like the lore I came up with around Dream and his land to try and fit canon elements into a non-Minecraft universe. The whole “king” thing while he’s clearly in power and the name of the land is in his name - the start of the worldbuilding and explanation around that is introduced here.)

# the minor fall, the major lift

## Chapter Notes

[discord](#) to get pings for updates/discuss stuff!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Techno vaguely recalls each city or town they cross and stop at for the night, each distinct from the last in their own little ways. They fall into a pattern quickly - fly, reach an island as night envelops the world in its silent embrace, sleep to dawn, and continue flying.

There are islands in between, usually dots of nothing but barren rock and seabirds, or occasionally overgrown with unfamiliar vegetation and hidden wildlife. They stop to eat and rest when they can, though Techno echoes Phil's sentiment of reaching the continent as quickly as possible. Preparedness is everything, and not just in war.

The feeling of wind slicing against his face *does* get old after a few days, however, and after two weeks Techno is very, very bored. Elytras can't mimic the complex movements Phil twirls in the air with his feathery wings and flexible bone joints, though he has challenged himself to come as close as possible.

When they stop at any settlement, Techno feels a familiar twinge of... something. Unease, some might say, though he refuses to allow himself to be unsettled. Anger, perhaps - but contrarily, Techno rarely feels true anger, and this he would say is not it.

Whatever it is, the idea of government looms over him. Tommy hasn't forgiven him, he knows, and the moobloom bulbs were more of a reassurance than any true bridge rebuilder. He isn't quite sure if he wants to pursue that route just yet anyway, delicate and fraught with hidden land mines as it is.

Instead he continues observation of the people bustling around in the spots of civilization they stop at. Each under the shadow of laws and expectations, bowing heads at the mercy of tyrants.

He knows Tubbo means well, knows he means his best when he declares a new era for L'Manberg. But the game of politics is one which butchers the potential of heroes, grounds the ideals to a withering paste and blows it into the unforgiving winds of viciousness.

If Tubbo wishes to keep power and make any semblance of difference, he will need to stray down that path of corruption sooner than later, before more ruthless opponents take advantage of that fragility.

It's a game Techno has played himself, and one he does not care to play again.

*"You either die a hero, or live long enough to see yourself become the villain."* The phrase is coined and applied and proven in the world of power. L'Manberg and the Dream SMP have now provided more examples than Techno cares to count.

Tommy would have needed to go down that same path too, if he had stayed with Tubbo and given his support, or else be cast aside by a leader who cannot afford a single weak link for the sake of his country and his power.

A whirlwind of thoughts and feelings claw inside Techno at the entire idea, all of which bad but none of which he understands.

But Tommy is not in L'Manberg, treading that dangerous game of power and influence, the flimsy network of allies and enemies that can shift so unexpectedly with each passing second. He is here, with them, and so is Wilbur.

It's enough to settle his nerves somewhat as he walks down streets that scream power with each white-washed stone mortar filled borders it's composed of, bearing the marks of their true owners in flags and carvings and the deliberate ways they twist around each individual building - or don't.

Techno has traveled between continents before, and like last time a few places - or groups, linger in his mind more than others.

One such comes when there's only a distant, seemingly uninhabited island in sight as night rises behind them.

"I was hoping we wouldn't have to stop here, but we don't have much of a choice," Phil says as he steadies Wilbur's landing. The sun has fully set, darkness now dousing the world.

Techno glances around. The island they've landed on is big. Large enough for a full town, but creeping with jungle trees and a mass of twisting vines and bushes. A lone strip of sandy shore separates the dense thickets from the staticky waves.

"Better than sleeping in the ocean." Tommy frowns. "Fuck mosquitoes, though."

"No, that's not it," Phil says, and Techno understands what he means now.

"Huh?"

"Too quiet," Techno says. "Can't hear any animals or monsters - so there's someone here. A few, probably."

"Right there are. What brings you four to our island?"

The voice comes from nowhere and everywhere, source indistinguishable even to him.

Phil places both hands up, and gives Techno a level stare. Techno sighs, and nods in compliance.

"We're just travelers looking for rest," Phil calls. "I promise we mean no harm, and will leave in the morning."

"We don't need your fucking permission to be here," Tommy snaps, and Phil shushes him with a frown.

"We don't! If the cowards are too scared to face us like normal-"

"Tommy, please don't make this harder for us," Techno says. "We're clearly outnumbered here. By a lot, probably."

"Oh, I'm the great Technoblade, I can pull so much information from my ass-"

"We'll make sure he doesn't cause trouble," Phil hastily calls.

There's a moment of silence, and then the swath of green before them shakes. A shape with long hair and a shimmering netherite sword steps out, individual features hidden by the darkness.

"Philza, wasn't it?" she asks. "And the infamous Technoblade."

"I see my reputation precedes me," Techno says dryly.

"Right," Philza says. "I'm hoping to negotiate for actual housing for the night too?"

"8 diamonds," she says immediately. "Wait - 10, actually, since that one is so annoying. Unless you have something else you wish to trade?"

"Information," Phil responds, clearly prepared. "About the Dream Kingdom and L'Manberg, among other things. From me."

There's faint muttering from the jungle, and the figure leans back and turns to the bushes. A moment later, she moves to face them again.

"Follow me," she says.

Phil gives them all a nod, and follows.

~\*~

For a minute they push and slash their way through twisting roots and vines and bushes in patterns so thick Tommy fills the silent night with curses of revenge. Techno is sure he hears a quiet giggling in response to a few of them.

Then, a wide, trodden path opens up and they're met with little resistance from nature the rest of the way. The figure is silent the entire time.

Eventually, they're led to a small village of houses scattered across an open clearing. Each seems to lean more heavily into aesthetics than anything else, Techno thinks, wondering who has the time to carve little spirals and designs along the glass and metal of individual lanterns.

One of the doors open, and someone pokes their head out. Techno sees a mop of blond hair and dark black eyes before he thinks *this is familiar-*

"Who are you?" the person asks. He blinks, and stares at Phil, whose wings seem to fluff up. Techno catches a glimpse of purple feathers behind the door.

"They're staying the night and leaving in the morning," their guide says to him. She moves to a house with darkened windows and opens the door. "There's more than enough beds in here. But Philza needs to come with me first."

"We don't need-"

"Tommy," Phil says. "I know what I'm doing. It's fine."

Behind them, a click sounds, and then another one.

*Interesting*, Techno thinks.

~\*~

The walls are bare, but well built, all the furniture in good condition.

Wilbur's steps, then, are slow. Methodical, echoing the fine grain of wood sanded down to plains. The eyes in the walls sand down him as he sits down on the bed Techno points at.

They're judging, he thinks. Or watching. Perhaps there is no difference. How does one observe without thinking of their observations in turn?

Tommy is saying something. Wilbur doesn't know what. He rarely does, these days. It's easier to stay in the murk of uncertainty and allow all reality to fly over his head. Create no perch for them to land, a vast ocean of roiling waves.

His hand traces the shape of curved leather in a small bag he was given - or that he took. He doesn't know which it is either, just that it holds... his things. Whatever nebulous definition of *his* is, anyway.

It's fine, he tells himself, and not fine. But Wilbur can live in the contradictions. It's almost as if he's made of them.

~\*~

"Who are these creepy people anyway?" Tommy grumbles as Phil slips through the door.

"A... small community," Phil says. He flops down on his bed and yawns. "I wish I knew more, but information on them is scarce. Got word they moved to this island during my trip to Dream's place."

"And information from you is valuable enough that they're willing to let strangers live in their place?" Techno asks.

"Well, this probably isn't one of their main bases," Phil says. "Nowhere near as grandiose and elaborate. I've bartered with them a few times, so they know me enough to trust I won't mess anything up. And yes, I'm actually a good supplier of information. Comes with traveling to so many places."

"And what else did you get?"

"Nothing gets past you, does it?" Phil chuckles. "These were impulse buys, but the chance was too good to pass up."

He drags over his bag and pulls out 4 shimmering golden totems.

"What are those?" Tommy asks. His eyes widen, reflecting the wavy enchantments in the torchlight.

"How much did you pay for these?" Techno asks. "And what kind of 'small community' has enough of them they're willing to sell away 4?"

"I paid 20 diamonds," Phil shrugs. "And by their standards I got ripped off."

"20 diamonds for 4 totems of undying," Techno repeats. There's true amazement in his voice, much to Phil's amusement.

"What are they?" Tommy demands.

“If you hold them and suffer an injury that would kill you, it heals the injury enough to save your life,” Phil explains. “One use, of course. They’re very, very rare and require a lot of fighting with certain monsters to get. I figured since we have to rest here anyway, I might as well take the chance to see if there’s anything good in stock.”

“Is there anything else you got?” Techno asks. “We only have so many diamonds, Phil.”

“ *You* only have so many diamonds,” Phil corrects. “I have a lot more. But yes.”

Carefully, he pulled out a warm, shining nether star from his bag.

“...how much did you pay for *that*? ” Techno asks with more clear disbelief.

“10 diamonds,” Phil shrugs. “And they actually gave me some stuff for free.”

Finally, he grasps and holds up two black discs in torchlight. On one is engraved *Cat*, and the other, *Mellohi*, letters curving in pearly white around the colored centers. The black circles gleam back and forth as he turns his hand, showing countless lines of grooves.

Tommy is silent for a long moment.

“I know it’s not the same,” Phil finally says. “But I also have a jukebox in my ender chest. You can listen to them again.”

“I-” Tommy takes a deep breath, and closes his eyes. “Okay. Thanks, Phil.”

Phil holds his hand out, and Tommy takes the discs. He stares at them as if they were foreign objects from a different world whose purpose he has no idea of.

“Thanks,” he echoes again, and Phil nods at the ender chest in the corner of the room. Tommy walks over and places them in.

“Let’s go to sleep, alright?” he murmurs. “We still have much flying to do.”

~\*~

They don’t speak of the discs when they leave in the morning.

~\*~

They've been flying for a little more than 3 weeks, and Tommy hates it.

It's boring. So. Fucking. Boring. He's taken to Techno's idea of trying some fancy midair tricks, but they can't get too elaborate for the sake of time.

They eventually land on another island. A city-state, Phil explains, beholden only to themselves. According to him, islands make prime locations for such settlements, especially when far apart.

Tommy wonders if L'Manberg would have had more success as an island. If, instead of some random strip of far out land with mildly discontent citizens that preferred them over Dream, they choose one of his kingdom's numerous isles to base their revolution. There were plenty of cities with an independent streak on those.

Geography is everything, according to both Phil and Techno, and wouldn’t they know?



Wilbur based their revolution around drugs, though. He wanted to control the supply. And the area of L'Manberg was known for their drug exports long before he or Tommy showed up.

It would be such a *stupid* reason to lose independence.

This line of thinking isn't something he should dwell on too much. And Tommy usually doesn't - dwell on what ifs, that is. He's too smart to fall into that trap, or so he would proclaim.

But the flights are long and his mind wanders. He can't help himself.

*Like you always do*, some voice inside him reminds.

Tommy tells that part of him to shut the fuck up.

~\*~

Phil greets acquaintances and refreshes himself on news during each stop. Island settlements have ports in abundance, and where there are ports, there are travelers with rumors and speculations and, occasionally, trustworthy information.

He learns of more unrest and tension in the Dream SMP, or "Dream Kingdom", especially surrounding L'Manberg. The Badlands are getting involved as well. Talk buzzes around the topic like flies to a charred carcass, few able to look away from the spectacle unfolding.

Eret is king again, apparently. Something about George being exiled. Unless the situation has flipped once more - news travels slower when they're so far away, taking weeks or sometimes months to reach even busy trade cities with large messenger bird centers.

Phil wonders whether he should treat the whole situation with amusement or concern, and ultimately decides that he simply doesn't care. Few people here do, further from Dream's Kingdom or L'Manberg than they'll ever travel. They're distant, amusing stories at best, the only impact being occasional concerns around international trade.

He hopes Tommy and Wilbur can, one day, treat them the same way.

~\*~

"We're almost there," Phil says one night. "I've been keeping track of our route, and it's probably just another day of flying to reach mainland."

Techno shuffles the blankets of his bed - there's a cockroach scuttling somewhere, he knows it. Now to slaughter the wretched thing.

"Finally," Tommy grumbles. "My shoulders hurt so fucking much, this better all be worth it. I'm not using an elytra for the rest of my life."

"You'll eat those words one day," Techno comments.

Though, he agrees with Tommy on one part. A long break from flying would be greatly welcome.

"Well, almost there," Phil shrugs. "And the winds should be good too. The ships in this area tend to travel fast in the westward direction."

"Travel fast, you say," Techno hums. He tilts his head. A faint hiss traces his ears.

“Lucky them,” Tommy grumbles. “Bet those people don’t have to deal with shoulder pain to go everywhere.”

Techno grips his blankets, and yanks. A wild flurry of buzzes rise as a dark brown figure shoots across his vision - and then it’s dead, a green sludge of guts smeared against a window. He eyes the piece of stained wood in his hands with a look of disdain.

Phil grimaces, and Tommy makes a warbled gagging noise.

“Invasive,” Techno notes. “According to *Flora of Novixl*, it’s ships which brought them to places they shouldn’t be in. A pest on native plant populations.”

“Is that another stupid metaphor?” Tommy snorts. “Since you love them so damn much, why don’t you compare-”

“Actually, Tommy,” Phil says, and Techno grins. “He was saying we should take a ship the rest of the way there. To, you know. Not have to fly anymore.”

Tommy is silent for a long moment, glancing between the two with increasingly furrowed eyebrows.

“Did - did - you did that on purpose!” He whirled to Techno with a familiar indignance, huffing. “Mocking me, Techno? You’ll be sorry when-”

“Tommy, you’re only mocking yourself,” Techno says, flattening his voice as much as possible. He internally grins as Tommy scowls further.

“Oh shut up! I’ll show you who has the best ideas, we’ll find the best fucking ship-”

“So you agree?” Phil asks.

Tommy slouches back on his bed with a scowl.

“Sure,” he mutters. “Sure.”

“So we’re all in agreement...”

Techno follows Phil’s eyes to Wilbur, staring limply out a window.

“Wilbur?” Phil asks.

“Why do we even bother anymore?” Tommy rolls his eyes. “He never disagrees with anything. The TNT probably blew out his brains too.” There’s a bitter note seeping in, one Techno has quickly gotten used to in the past month.

Wilbur flinches, ever so slightly.

Phil clears his throat. “Tommy.”

Tommy looks away, and falls silent.

That is also something Techno has gotten used to in the past month. Though perhaps “used to” isn’t the right phrase. It doesn’t surprise him anymore.

But none of this hasn’t begun to feel even the slightest bit normal.

“Ship,” Techno reminds, the word coming slowly. “Wilbur, you good with that?”

“Sure,” Wilbur mumbles quietly. Tommy snorts, yet again.

“About 2 to 3 days with good winds, then,” Phil says. “We’ve made good time so far, so that’s... good.”

Techno scrapes off bits of dead cockroach the best he can and opens the window. The plank is tossed out, and the window closes again with a snap.

“Let’s hope it stays that way,” he says.

~\*~

It’s nice to feel a solid, though moving floor beneath his boots, to ride alongside the rises and falls of the ocean’s precarious whims. Some call it disjuncting, dizzying, horrifically unpleasant - Phil calls it soothing. At times entertaining, even.

“Having fun?” he asks as Tommy approaches him.

“The food’s terrible.”

“There’s dried berries in your backpack, if you want a snack.”

Tommy huffs, but presses against the railing beside Phil and stares down into the dancing waters below. A few droplets leap up, grazing his cheeks with a streak of shimmer in the sunlight.

Phil smiles softly, and leans closer.

~\*~

“You doin’ okay?” Techno slowly sits down next to Wilbur, careful to avoid sudden movements. The blankets crumple with little resistance.

The compartment is devoid of anyone else. There is only them, the darkness, and the everlasting lull of ocean waves rocking their world back and forth.

Wilbur remains silent. Techno struggles to not sigh, or shift, or do anything beyond soft whispering, really.

“You have to start talking some time, you know,” he tries.

*Anything*, he thinks. *Come on, Wilbur.*

“I...” Wilbur seems to fold into himself, curling up tighter against the black painted walls. “I don’t know. No. Probably not.”

Techno closes his eyes. Maybe this is a mistake.

It probably is. The mistake being that he didn’t bring Phil down with him.

But does Phil understand, the hours upon hours Wilbur spent covering every quarter of Pogtopia in buttons, or the maddened ravings he hissed at an increasingly frightened Tommy (while Techno watched in the background shadows)?

The way dim torchlights flickered erratically as his hands breezed past them, gesturing proclamations of hope and betrayal and tyranny to cold stone walls, or the echoes of sobbing and screaming that rang in Techno's ears long after they had in reality quieted?

People like having a purpose, Techno knows. His is to conquer, to dominate, to be the best at everything and crush all competition between bloodied fingers and crazed, mocking laughter.

Wilbur has always been far more noble, the rhythm of convictions and constitutions weaving through every proclamation. He wants the best for everyone, for the world, to change what he sees into what he believes to be better by the power of his own words and actions - or he wanted to, anyway.

Whichever it is right now is not the point of concern for Techno.

"You've been quiet," Techno says. He mentally runs through the list he has prepared, and selects a safer question. "Why don't you go out and see the sun?"

The question is hypocrisy at its finest, but *somehow*, he doubts Wilbur will care.

Wilbur blinks slowly, and turns away from him.

"Do I deserve the sunlight?"

Sharp, stabbing icicles shoot through his blood, chilling everything into coldness.

*Oh no.*

"You - Phil would-"

He is far, far too in over his head, Techno realizes. There is absolutely no way he can deal with this. This is the definition of biting off more than he can chew, but he's already committed, but he can't-

"Yes," is what he settles on, but it rings hollow even to his own mind.

Sharply, stiffly, he races up and bolts for the door. It just barely slams behind him.

Leaving Wilbur in the dark again, completely alone and more miserable than ever.

His chest burns with a terrible, terrible pain, swamping his senses with a suffocating grip.

Techno doesn't know why he ever thought this would be a good idea.

~\*~

It's dark. And damp. The walls creak, and it assaults his ears. They're blank and unforgiving and hold no love.

It's also cold. But not as cold as before, he thinks, despite the shaking inside of him.

He wonders if that's a good thing.

~\*~

"Oh wow, is that *actual fucking landmass?* "

“No need to hurt the ocean’s feelings, Tommy,” Techno says. “It’s already had to see your face for the past 2 days.”

Tommy splutters, and with a sigh Phil herds them away from the pier.

“The only thing we need to get is horses,” he says when the smell of salt no longer clings to everything around them. “Then we’ll find a place to... to live, I guess.”

He’s done this so many times, and yet it feels so new.

“And do whatever we fucking want without bitches that try to kill us,” Tommy says, with a punctuated vehemence Phil doesn’t expect.

“And that,” Techno agrees.

Right. That.

~\*~

They secure horses, and start riding.

Techno names his Theseus. Tommy eyes him when he tells it so, and recieved only a quirked mouth in reply. Phil merely shakes his head.

Finding a place they agree upon turns out to be much more difficult than he initially thought. He has accounted for some time lost to that, but...

“What about here?”

“It’s so flat. Boring.”

“Tommy, there’s forests nearby.”

“It’s not defensible either, so he actually has a point for once.”

“Like we need defense with you around.”

“I’m lazy. Why work when the geography can work for me?”

“Fair enough, I guess.”

~\*~

“Here?”

“I’m not living on top of a mountain.”

“This is barely a hill, Tommy.”

“How about *no*.”

~\*~

“Too swampy.”

“Agreed.”

~\*~

“The air’s too moldy.”

“What kind of shitty reasoning is that?”

“You have yours, I have mine.”

~\*~

“This looks good,” Phil says.

“More mountains?”

“They’re not that bad.”

They’ve been brushing against a mountain range for the entire journey anyway, riding further and further north. It runs down the continent, and here before them is the point where it brushes the coastline as well, like two ropes intertwining midway. From their vantage point on one of the highest peaks (reached with elytras, after Tommy has grumbled and their horses have been tied down), the lands stretch out before them.

Points of white and gray slope up and down, and bordering the shore, dark waves lap against towering cliffs. Further out into the mist Phil sees the mottles of russet and green where pines and evergreens mingle with deciduous forests, like the sunset has dappled its colors onto an ocean of swaying leaves.

In the very, very far distance he can just make out a collection of glowing lights. They’re bunched in a cove, Phil realizes. A small area where the land tilts into a gentle slope, cradled on three sides by sheer mountain cliffs and one side by a blue-gray ocean.

“There’s a village there,” he says. He places a hand on Wilbur’s shoulder and tugs him closer.

“We’re not living in a place with a government,” Techno says flatly.

“Well, we don’t have to live *there*,” Phil says. “But somewhere close by would be nice. We could buy and sell stuff, and access to a seaside port is always good. Plus-”

He points at a river that waves through the valley just beneath them, and traces its path. “It would go just by the village, which makes sense. And there’s probably streams and smaller rivers that run down the mountains around it, so that’s also ideal.”

“Maybe,” Techno says. He does seem more considerate of the idea with each passing second.

“Plus, you have your defensibility right there,” Phil grins. “The high ground, remember? And who would go through the trouble of bothering us?”

Tommy clears his throat.

“Mountains aren’t so bad,” Phil repeats. “In case you haven’t noticed, they cut this continent in half and most of it hugs the coastline.”

“Unless you want two more months of horseback riding,” Techno adds. “Since you’ve complained so much about the elytra.”

“It’s not a definite choice,” Phil adds, watching Tommy slowly loosen his shoulders. “Let’s just check it out, alright?”

Tommy tugs at the elytra, fingers running through the translucent membrane.

“Alright,” he finally says.

~\*~

Another day and a half of riding, and they’re at the outskirts of the village.

“We’re not going there,” Techno says. “Not until we’ve geared up.”

Phil internally winces at the terminology, but agrees. The rest of the day is spent coaxing their horses up the tallest bordering mountain.

It’s not bad, he thinks as they’re halfway up. There’s enough arable land to sustain far more than just the four of them, and more trees and foliage than visible rock. On the side that faces the village a small river indents the mountain, fed by numerous trickling streams of various sizes. The peak stretches above into the clouds, still a distant, faint white dot.

“There?” he murmurs to Techno, pointing at a nearby cave. “High enough for you?”

“Enough for me,” Tommy says. “We’re not living higher than this. The air is killing me.”

“Oh-” Phil bits his lip. “Right, sorry. We didn’t climb up this too quickly, did we?”

“Well, the month of flying helped,” Techno says.

“No nausea? Pain?”

“No, Phil, the air is not literally killing me right now,” Tommy says. He pauses before adding, “we’ll live on your stupid mountain like cavemen if you really want it so much.”

“Oh, great!” Phil sweeps him up in a hug, grinning.

Things aren’t fixed. But it’s the first step, and that’s what matters right now. His wings ruffle just a little looser.

“I regret this already.”

“We should probably start preparing for a shelter instead of dawdling,” Techno drawls behind them. “Unless you both want to spend the night fighting monsters?”

“Right, right,” Phil laughs. “But let us celebrate a little, okay? We’re here. We’re living here.”

Three hours later, after the cave has been fortified and sleeping areas laid out, Phil watches the sun slowly sink behind the peaks.

The mountaintops are a brilliant golden hue, and the valleys shaded red. Gradients of light fall across the vast landscape around him, shifting and shadowing as the world descends into the night.

A stray red leaf catches on his right wing, and he pulls it out. Maple, dappled with oranges and yellows, and the faintest hint of green on the stem. The trees reflect those colors, waves of red and orange and yellow and green splashing like paint across the forests that cling to life on the cold, windy mountains. The wind flutters his hair up and brushes thinly against his cheeks, soft as a feather. A few more leaves swirl past.

Phil has lived in many places. He knows when they begin to feel like home, and when they never will.

There's faint rustling behind him. He turns to see Wilbur stepping his way out the cave, eyes downcast.

"Wil," he calls. Wilbur turns to him.

Phil pats the flat rock he's sitting on. And slowly, Wilbur makes his way over.

"Are you alright?" Phil asks as he sits down.

A look of hesitation.

Phil wraps his arms around him, and pulls him closer. Soft hair brushes his neck.

"Tommy and Techno are arguing again," Wilbur says, voice small. "I - I don't-"

"It's alright," Phil murmurs. "You can always come to me."

A long moment later, he feels a tiny, jerked nod.

Phil inhales the sharp, crisp air, hears the distant caws of ravens and screeches of eagles, can feel the thrum of life in this immense and wild territory - and he knows that they have reached a home.

## Chapter End Notes

as always, comments appreciated! would love to know what you thought!

do I use metric system or imperial system or an obscure thing no one knows about or some amalgamation of various unit systems or invent my own units help I can't go much longer without getting some actual damn measurements in here-

and oh yeah hey they're FINALLY there haha isn't that funny it only took 13000 words and that was totally planned

(i reply to comments live! [twitch](#)

[tumblr](#) and [twitter](#) for questions and art!)



# when all they can do is stare blankly

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Phil can taste frost in the air, familiar and biting. A needle-sharp promise. And he doesn't miss the patches of snowdrifts that dot the mountainsides or valleys, or the way the glacial tops are far larger than he remembers, from when he last visited the continent during late springtime a few years ago.

Winter has already come. They're in a temporary warm spell, but soon it will snow again, and they need to build up shelter before then.

That brings its own problems. He knows from experience that with mountains mean avalanches, and positioning is crucial.

So, in the first yawning stretches of dawn on the second day, while fire begins to grace the rotten flesh and powder-brittle bones of the undead, while his sons collect water and ready their supplies, Phil flies around the middling area of the mountain to determine a location.

The caves could work, of course, but Tommy has expressed enough annoyance and privately Phil agrees with some of his gripes. They can do with a much prettier view than dark, damp cave systems, though it wouldn't hurt as a basement if he finds a good position.

The wind is cold and sharp today, with none of the salty tang he has gotten used to. It's a welcome change, he decides.

With the dancing dawn of sunlight he makes out the mountain's coloring rags. The darting reds of cardinals and hawks, prancing goats of gray and white, streaks of stubborn flowers scattering into the wind petals burgundy and pale and blue the soft tint of the skies above.

With a few minutes of soaring flight, a large cluster of trees nearly bare of anything but branches catch his eyes.

It's big enough to be counted as a small forest. The woods are dense, denser than normal on the mountains, and several streams trickle into a river that weaves through rocky shores.

Angling to the right for a better view, Phil realizes the area's raised to a level platform, a higher elevation than the slanted mountainside around it. Yet there's shallow, sloping indentation downwards beyond the perimeter, the shape of a giant cauldron half-sunk into the mountain.

He flies down.

A herd of goats race off in skittering leaps as he lands, boots sinking into soft moss. A bed of leaves litter the rocks and dirt and large patches of grass, the branches above clinging to a scattering of leaves clattering like crickets against the wind.

There's plenty of wood here. The bouldered ground twists itself with shapes both concave and convex, areas jagged as broken glass and smooth as slabs of marble.

It's a softer breeze here, occasionally rising in gentle brushes. Phil runs a hand through his hair. The area is protected for sure, the raised rocky barrier and dense trees providing natural shields.

A little ways away, he spots a crack in the ground. And after a few minutes of quiet listening, he moves over to investigate.

Phil kneels down and peers down a ravine that scars into the mountain. The opening itself is relatively small, no longer than he is, and the ground that gives way below slants at an angle. It's easily large enough for him to slide down.

The angled terrain that yawns into the depths isn't terribly steep, and he can see the darkness stretching wider as it continues. Clumps of ferns and twisting weeds and the occasional gnarled sapling grow along the bottom side, ever resolute in the face of an unforgiving environment.

Phil unslings his bag and places it next to the ravine. Pulls out a lantern and a match, and lights a fire.

Taking a deep breath, he folds his wings and gingerly lowers himself over the edge.

Loose gravel slides beneath him, crunching warningly as he grips a nearby clump of weeds to slow his fall. The crackling of tumbling stones and lantern fire whip his ears.

*Deep breath. You've done this before.*

Phil carefully loosens his grip, and slides further down.

The bottom meets him faster than he realizes, a flat stretch of land just below the darkness. Waving his lantern hovering above the floor, he carefully straightens up. Through the dim light he can make out a few streaks of ore, dull lines of colors faintly teasing from the borders of his vision. But more importantly - space.

The bottom is reasonably flat to walk on, and from what he can tell, stable. He can hear a stream in the dark beyond his vision.

After some exploration, Phil also realizes that it's relatively small. Walking from one end to the other can be achieved in less than a minute, and the ceiling is still just a few paces taller than him. But it's just half as wide as it is long, and that's enough for a significant amount of storage.

The climb back up takes a bit more time, but a few careful minutes later Phil is blowing out his lantern and swinging his bag back over his shoulder.

~\*~

"It's not bad," Techno agrees, surveying the area. Tommy mumbles something under his breath, but neither of them pay him mind.

"About as good as you can hope for in a place like this," Phil says. "Shall we get going?"

Techno swings up his axe. *Axe of Peace*, it's called, engraved across a silvered handle.

*Fitting*, Phil thinks. There's a relief in the idea.

~\*~

Trees are quickly chopped, foundations planned out. Phil marks out the dimensions of a cabin with scatterings of branches in a rectangular shape, including the tiny ravine in the top area of the box.

Tommy had closed his eyes and sighed when he explained the idea, but eventually nodded.

Wilbur simply agreed, avoiding his gaze.

“We have to move on, I guess,” was what he said. “I - I don’t want to stop anyone from doing that.”

Phil had hugged them both, and nodded, and tried to keep the heavy guilt in his chest from collapsing them all to the ground. Techno had watched wordlessly, head tilted at an angle too hesitant.

They went to work with a paced, straightforward swiftness. The process of building a home is familiar to Phil, and he trusts that his sons know what they’re doing also.

Tommy and Techno go to the river a little ways away to haul back buckets of clay and mud, along with sacks of grass and other weeds. Phil stays with Wilbur, like last time, and they sort out piles of stones. Large and small, jagged circles and flat slabs. When the first round of mud and clay arrives, they begin building the foundations.

“Mix the grass with the mud and clay,” Phil explains to Wilbur. “And then apply.”

They lay the stones and seal them together, and occasionally Tommy pauses in hauling material to help.

After a few hours, the foundation is complete, a mismatch of stones held together by drying mud, and the floor smoothed over with an extra thick layer of clay.

The perimeter Phil has laid out is small, just large enough for four small beds and a bit of walking space. They need usable shelter before night, after all, and this is the largest they can build in a day.

“Do you have an axe?” Phil asks Wilbur when they sit down to rest a few minutes.

“No,” is the stilted reply. “Burned everything I could and threw away what I couldn’t before the final battle.”

Phil places a hand on his shoulder, trying to settle more warmth into it than he himself feels. But he’s no expert on any of these matters, can only try with futile mimics of what glimpses he’s seen other people provide - and what if he does more harm than good?

*One thing at a time*, he reminds himself. *Stability is what’s most important right now.*

“We’ll get you one then,” he says. “We all need to cut enough trees for shelter tonight. Is that alright?”

“Sure,” Wilbur says. And he leaves it at that.

Phil reaches over to the ender chest he has placed down, and digs through the cold void of space it contains. He pulls out his own shimmering netherite axe, and then a diamond one he has for backup.

“Here,” he says, holding it out by the handle.

Wilbur takes it.

Phil allows his shoulders to relax. It’s not much, but none of this is. It’s just what they have to work with.

~\*~

There's plenty of spruce and pine in the forest, tall, thin trunks ideal for a quick log cabin.

Phil's axe fells the trees with a sheer only enchantments can provide. He skins the rough bark, drags them over to the pile by the foundation.

Techno and Wilbur do the same, while Tommy cuts notches into the logs and begins securing them on top of each other. They'll have to rely on the notches for interlocking the wood, and good positioning, for stability for now.

Techno would make some internal connection about the ironic symbolism of it all. Phil is too tired to humor such ideas.

~\*~

"The notches go this way, idiot." Techno rolls his eyes, the movement coming perhaps a bit too easily.

"It's the same fucking thing! This way works just as well!" Tommy scowls, shoulders hunching again.

"Tommy, me and Phil have been doing it this way for a long time. You don't need to go off and experiment right now."

"Well I *know* this way works—"

"With your vast sums of experience in cabin building?" Techno asks. He stifles a mocking chuckle, and Tommy scowl deepens.

"I'm the one who's chopping them, and building—"

"Get back to work, you two," Phil calls from his place beside a silent, back-turned Wilbur. "We don't have time."

Techno hefts his axe up and cuts a notch into the log in one smooth motion and a brief shower flying woodchips, facing the right way. He raises an eyebrow at Tommy.

Tommy makes some grumbly noise, but pulls out his axe and begins doing the same.

Techno internally breathes a sigh of relief. He isn't feeling particularly argumentative today, not that they need it.

After a few more carefully aimed cuts, he goes back to chopping trees and stripping the bark, the much more time consuming of the tasks.

*Thunk.*

The forest is louder when he's paying attention. The warbles of songbirds, nervous skittering of foxes and rodents, sound of goat hooves clinking warily against the cliffs. The drip of fresh rain and trickle of gathering streams, the way the winds rustle contently through beds of freshly fallen leaves.

*Thunk.*

Techno had been planning a retirement of sorts after the revolution. Settle down in some area alone, far away from what he knows would be the blown up remains of L'Manberg. He's known even before Wilbur revealed himself to be the traitor Dream coordinated with.

*Thunk.*

Perhaps this is it, just with extra steps. He certainly hadn't anticipated Phil coming along, and then asking that they all leave the continent.

*Thunk.*

It's peaceful, and despite long-standing belief, Techno appreciates peace. It seems that violence always finds and compels him, one way or the other, but whereas he once danced to its erratic rhythm he now finds himself on a chase from its bloody banquets.

*Thunk.*

Blood hasn't tasted sweet for a long time.

*Thunk.*

L'Manberg... why did he go to L'Manberg anyway? Techno was, still is, unsure of the true reason. Something drew him, reading Wilbur and Tommy's letters, keeping up with hushed whispers of news almost too audacious to be more than thin rumors.

*Thunk.*

Governments, perhaps, but despite his opposition he's never actively fought against the idea of them existing until then. It wasn't the promise of glory or power or even teaching Tommy a lesson, not that he would have ever learned it.

*Thunk.*

Well, perhaps Tommy has learned *some* lessons.

*Craaaaack-*

Techno steps back, and watches the tree begin to lean. It shuffles down slowly at first, then quicker and quicker, and then he hears a shaking series of snaps as it catches on the branches of its brethren in a futile attempt to stay upright. Alarmed squawking rises into the air with a swarm of wingbeats in the spidery canopy above.

Then, the tree is sideways, and silent, and still.

Techno rolls his shoulders, readies his axe. He'll indulge that train of thought later.

It doesn't matter too much, in the end. He doesn't have to justify his actions, least of all to himself.

~\*~

"Plank roof or nah?" Techno asks once the walls are higher enough, just half a feet or so above his head.

Phil glances at the sun, already touching the horizon. There's an ache marring his hands. He's sure a few bruises will develop from today, so filled with hard labor.

And the monsters will come out soon, that ever looming threat.

"No," he says. "Just a layer of logs for now. I'll work on the door."

Techno nods.

"Tommy! Wilbur!" he calls. "Help me get the roof done!"

Phil moves over to the timber pile. Selects a few large planks of wood and several smaller strips that Tommy has also cut out.

He lays the large ones side by side. Overlays the smaller ones sideways across. Nail them together with the back of his axe and sharp, steel nails purchased on the trip here.

A handle for both sides is fashioned from the wood of smaller branches, stripped smooth and further nailed together. He digs through his ender chest and finds some hinges, and drags the door up to be nailed.

Always building new structures has given him a plethora of experience. For once, it's put to good use not just for himself.

Once Phil is satisfied, opening and closing the door a few times, he steps inside.

The interior is dark and empty, save for the ravine in the back. He glances up and sees Tommy pushing the last log into place with a grimace, shrouding the cabin in near total darkness. Now, only small cracks of fading sunlight push between the logs, and even those determined sources are quickly drying up.

A window should be carved soon, he thinks. But not yet.

He lays a final piece of wood on the ground and chops them into splints. On the back corner's wall he hammers in a sharp piece and hangs a lantern on it. Carefully, he lights the lantern with a match and closes the glass window.

With significantly more light, the floor reveals more detail, bits of stone visible through the mostly clay layer.

The cabin was built in a day and it certainly looks the part, but it will do for now. Techno and him will probably have to keep watch again, just in case, but by tomorrow things should be fortified enough for them all to sleep through the night in peace.

Phil walks back outside and half carries, half drags two large stones, one for each side of the door. A proper lock can come later.

He glances west. The sun is setting.

Just in time.

~\*~

Without the necessary preparations for an indoor fire, Phil takes out some jerky, as well as an assortment of dried fruits and nuts. After eating, plans for expansion are brought up.

"A fireplace here would be good," Techno says, tapping his foot on the floor of the left side of the cabin. "The door's on the shorter width of the building, so heat in the middle of the long side would warm things up more effectively."

"The other side, idiot," Tommy interrupts. "Put it on the right side."

“Tommy, stop arguing every chance-”

“I’m not-”

“Tommy,” Phil says. “Please, you can’t-”

*“I’m not!”* Tommy snaps, voice lunging with a ferocity that throws Phil back with wide eyes, and he stomps into the floor with a hiss. Wilbur flinches, fingers beginning to shake. “Maybe if either of you bothered to listen to me and stop cutting me off at every fucking moment you’d *know*.”

He turns around and throws himself on his bed, a few slabs of wood heaped with woolen sheets.

Phil gapes, mind racing with a jumble of twisting shock and confusion and something stabbing inside him-

Tommy suddenly lets out a piercing screech muffled into the blankets, like the dying screams of a pained, wailing animal. It strangles Phil’s ears in a horrendous chromatic symphony.

Dread congeals in his stomach, sickening. Almost toppling. Nauseousness rises up inside him, an unforgiving glacier fast as ocean waves.

What - what is that about *not listening*? He tries to remember, think with angles different and grasping at the frayed connections.

They never did let Tommy explain, but Tommy doesn’t - he never really provides explanations-

*Do you really know him, after all of that?*

His throat chokes, and Techno is glancing between them both with a befuddled expression, like he doesn’t comprehend any of it.

Which he probably doesn’t. It’s never been Techno’s strong suit.

*Do something.*

*What? What can I-*

*He’s your son, do something-*

The screeching abruptly cut off, a frighteningly sudden strangle.

Phil is on his feet and next to Tommy in the next instant, shaking his shoulders.

“Tommy, what is it?”

With a strike of lightning horror, Phil realizes Tommy is crying.

Tommy has only ever cried in his dreams since they left Dream’s lands, resolute in his conviction to not break down in the waking world and Phil thought he was getting better and this is all his fault-

“Tommy,” Techno says, and Phil realizes he’s suddenly standing next to him.

“Neither of you listen to me,” Tommy gasps through sobs. “It’s always ‘shut up’ or ‘stop being dumb’ or whatever, both of you keep cutting me off and all my ideas keep getting talked over, and the - the

more it happens the more I keep trying to be heard but you guys keep shutting me the fuck down more-”

He breaks off himself this time, and sobs a bit more.

“It’s like both you are Wilbur all over again but without the craziness and just with more apathy and it’s fucking worse somehow.”

Techno is silent, unmoving and face carefully blank. There’s a quiet twitch of his fingers as he processes Tommy’s words.

Phil takes a deep breath and desperately scrabbles to put his thoughts together.

*Pogtopia* he thinks weakly. *L’Manberg*.

What was it, Techno has said, Wilbur has written in those few letters, about discs and revolutions and sacrifices? That the entire thing had been Wilbur’s idea, Tommy strung along with fantasies of freedom and fame, that-

*“Make no mistake,” Techno snorts, reading the letter. “Dream is in full control here, and he likes making people suffer.”*

*“And you want to join in because...” Phil raises an eyebrow.*

*“Look, my goal isn’t to drive Tommy and Wilbur crazy or suicidal, unlike Dream. And I’m the only one who could reasonably oppose him.”*

*“So you want to help.”*

*“Maybe. I want to liberate. Whether or not they’ll consider it ‘help’ is up for debate.”*

Since when was Tommy ever consulted or allowed control or deciding for himself in anything, when has it ever succeeded-

*“Wilbur, stop,” Tommy mumbles hysterically beneath the blankets, “you’re making a mistake, don’t-”*

*Phil places a hand on his shoulder, and tries to stifle the burning frustration inside of him. He can’t stop nightmares, can’t change the past, can’t do anything-*

And neither can Tommy-

Words fly away as he grasps at them, and he stutters for a few minutes, shuttering between half-choked noises of attempted comfort before sitting down next to Tommy and placing a hand on his shoulder. It always begins with this, it seems. A hand and a shoulder.

*Start simple*, he thinks weakly. *Always start simple*.

“I - I’m sorry,” he manages. “I didn’t-”

Didn’t mean to do what? Make his son feel so small and helpless and insignificant after everything he’s been through with L’Manberg, with Wilbur and Dream?

Didn’t mean to treat him like the foolish child he still thought of Tommy as, even after multiple wars and the hidden blade of politics that he knows slices away either a person’s childish naivety, or their



head?

There's no excuse. Phil has fucked up.

*Again.*

*"Kill me, Phil, kill me-"*

He thinks of Wilbur's hollow eyes and crazed laughter. He thinks of his own vow to keep them together and heal them no matter what.

And he feels a scathing fire in his throat, choking, a sentence of shame.

*You've failed as a father, again.*

"I..."

He doesn't know how long he sits there, stricken and unmoving.

Then, something brushes his wings.

"Phil," Techno says. He pauses, and continues after no response. "Philza. Dad."

"Yes?" Phil whispers.

"What-" Techno leans down and drops to a whisper as well. "What do I do?"

Oh. Techno's - it isn't fair to place Techno in this situation either. He has to...

Phil takes another deep breath and grips the wool blanket of the bed. It grounds him long enough to lean over further and wrap his arms around Tommy in a loose hug.

"Tommy," he says, bleeding desperation. "I'm sorry. And I promise to - to listen to you more. And not cut you off."

"Unless you're being really annoying," Techno says. "In which case you deserve it."

"Techno," Phil says, closing his eyes. "Please."

"I promise I won't keep cutting Tommy off or dismissing his ideas, unless-" Techno breaks off, face twisting into one of hesitation for a moment before sighing. "I promise I won't."

"I fucking hate you bitches," Tommy gasps back, face still buried in the blankets, but there's less rage in them now. He seems more subdued, more... defeated.

It's worse. It's worse, he shouldn't sound like this at all. This isn't spitfire ferociousness of a child he adopted all those years ago. He thinks that child will never return, now long dead with war and loss.

"Tommy, why do you think the fireplace should go on the opposite side?" Phil asks.

There's a long silence. One would think they're used to them by now, but it twists tighter knots in his stomach each time.

"There's a better view on the left side," Tommy finally says, quietly. "You can see the other valleys and mountains over that wall."

It's true, Phil realizes. The trees are more thinly spread on the left side of the cabin, and the forest ends shortly, with a relatively stone wall that drops to show the rest of the mountain range. The right side borders a dense thicket of trees followed by a much sheerer cliff.

"That's a good idea," he says. "Right, Techno?"

"...right," Techno says, still sounding confused. "We'll do that."

"Thanks for the suggestion, Tommy," Phil adds.

After another moment, Tommy responds.

"You're welcome."

It's short and stilted and buried with still lingering resentment. But it's a start.

Phil hugs him tighter. After a while, Tommy leans into the embrace as well.

## Chapter End Notes

Comments, feedback, ect greatly appreciated, like always!

I've decided to use a blend of imperial units, as well as some old units whose use has now been discontinued, and some made up ones too. Metric units, while a great staple of the modern age, have too much of a connotation for this setting (plus the idea of global or continental standardization exactly isn't too far along here).

I'm falling back into my obsessive research habits. Looked at so many pictures of mountains and wooden cabins and Youtube videos on people building log cabins (oddly satisfying?) and searched what kind of building materials were used pre-industrial era and avalanche prevention stuff.

# at one time in the world there were woods that no one owned

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Techno guards the tiny cabin the entire night, sitting on his bed with a sharpened sword. Phil tries to convince him to let him take over for a while, but Techno refuses with a silent shake of his head and a blink of dull, heavy eyes.

Phil is too tired to pursue the fight. Hopefully, they'll all be able to sleep next time.

When morning comes, they begin building once again.

~\*~

The sky is clear and cloudless, to Phil's immense relief.

"Tommy, do you want to—" Phil hesitates, and continues. "Do you want to cut the planks? Or reinforce the cabin?"

"The planks," Tommy says, and glances at Wilbur.

"I'll pack the mud," Wilbur says. And he moves to begin before Phil can ask further.

So while Wilbur packs mud and grass and wood chips into the cracks between the logs, and Tommy hefts his axe, Phil goes out with Techno to chop wood.

~\*~

Tommy stands, arching up. He rolls his shoulders, steps onto the large stone that they've used as a makeshift ladder, and begins rolling off the logs Techno had used as a makeshift roof.

Once all the logs are on the ground, Tommy takes out his axe.

*Planks, he reminds himself. We need planks. For a roof.*

He begins slicing off the bark. Measures out appropriate lengths and cuts.

Phil had taken out from his ender chest and left behind a saw as well, and Tommy uses it to cut the logs into smooth, rectangular pieces.

Measure carefully again.

The plumes of sawdust eventually force him to shut his stinging eyes, and Tommy quickly waves them away with his hands before resuming.

After 20 minutes, he decides he can't take the silence of conversation anymore.

"Wil," he says, glancing at his brother. A part of him still recoils at the idea of making conversation with Wilbur, all crazed laughter and dead eyes, but it's a part that's been dimming slowly throughout their entire journey.

If he's leaving all of L'Manberg behind with no plans to return, with the intent to throw that whole past behind... does L'Manberg really matter?

Does Wilbur's betrayal really matter?

They should, and Tommy wants them to *so* badly, because if they didn't - it would mean the entire past 2 years or so would have been in vain, would have been completely *pointless*.

But Tommy stares at the axe in his hand and cabin to his right and the mountain air that is both so familiar and so foreign, and his family all surrounding him, working together again, and he-

-he doesn't know. He's not sure he wants to know.

He has to talk. To someone. The silence is too much, and he needs a distraction.

"Wilbur," he says again, louder and more insistent.

Wilbur slowly pauses, and turns to stare at him. He's stained with mud from shoulders to shoes, hands covered in squelching brown. Two years ago, Tommy is sure, he would never have volunteered for or accepted the job so readily.

A lot can change in two years.

*(A lot has changed.)*

Fuck change. It has done nothing but screw Tommy over.

*(Except when it hasn't.)*

"Yes?" Wilbur finally asks, as though he's been waiting for a ball that never dropped. His tone is flat. Expectant. Of what, Tommy doesn't know. He feels like he doesn't know Wilbur at all now, the brother he once loved reduced a withered husk stripped all the way down to bone.

"Talk to me," Tommy demands.

"About what?"

Tommy hefts his saw and begins cutting planks again.

"Something. You love talking about things, Wilbur, just start. It's not that fucking hard."

Wilbur is silent for a few moments, and Tommy resists the urge to shake him. He can't. Phil would be disappointed, Wilbur would break further in some unimaginable way even if it *is* his own fault in the first place (not that Tommy cares at all).

"Wil-

"This is a nice place," Wilbur suddenly says. "It's pretty."

Tommy blinks, and glances at the forest. The mountains around them, stretching into the foggy distance. The whispering rattles of the branches as the forest sways around them. The cool, sailing wind and bite of frost in the air.

"Go on," he says. The log he's sawing splits, and Tommy hauls the two long pieces apart. He pulls one onto the rock table again and continues sawing again.

"I'm not sure what I'm supposed to be doing," Wilbur says. "About L'Manberg, that is. But I can't stop thinking about it."

"Well, there's no plans to go back," Tommy mutters, and something like regret twinges within him at the thought.

But he pushes it away. He's made his choice, and let it never be said that Tommy can't commit to his choices.

"Right," Wilbur says. "That's where all the traitors are. But Tommy, I can't stop thinking about the traitors either. Sometimes I think I should go back and blow it all fucking up again, or just go *back*. I was supposed to die with it, but then Phil refused, but I still want to die with it, Tommy. It's *my* L'Manberg."

Tommy freezes.

"That's... not what you're supposed to do, Wilbur," he says. But then something within him seizes as he realizes there's a familiar shadow in Wilbur's eyes, dark and haunting and oh so familiar and-

-for a moment Tommy hurled back into the ravine, walls crushing closer and closer as Wilbur's declarations madness and villainy claw through his ears and screech in his mind with a litany of mania and confusion-

Tommy throws down the saw and tumbles in an effort to sit down and clutches the boulder next to him.

No, this was the same but so different as well, the words a defeated murmur and the shadows a pale initiation of what they once were, and Wilbur is defeated and his dreams of villainy should be *gone*.

*But Wilbur's not gone. He's still alive.*

"Don't die, Wil, Phil would be so mad," Tommy whispers. His throat creaks with the words.

"Would he?" Wilbur mutters, and that familiar doubt is there again.

Tommy sucks in a deep breath.

He's never had the same interest in stories and writing as Techno has, but he's heard his fair share just by proxy of being around him.

Back during their time in Pogtopia, Tommy once thought of a tale he'd heard long ago, about a man who fell in love with a statue of a woman he had created. He slowly stopped eating and drinking and working, mind delving deeper and deeper into desire and yearning for that woman, a cold, lifeless statue, to love him back. And he had prayed and prayed to the gods, and eventually his wish was granted when the statue came alive.

Wilbur was that man, and L'Manberg that statue, and Dream that amused god, Tommy had thought at the time. Just as obsessive and just as fanatical. But he would eventually win L'Manberg's freedom, true freedom, and they would have a happy ending.

Now, Tommy remembers a different version of the tale, the story reimaged. A much more interesting - and realistic take.

The story goes like this:

Someone stole that statue to sell for profit, and the man chased after him. Slowly, he descended into madness as his attempts at retrieval became more and more desperate.

At the climax, the man was faced with the fact that he couldn't escape with the statue. That the antagonist had too much power, and him too little.

So he smashed it into fine marble dust, declaring "my love, if I can't live with your beauty and life, then no man alive deserves you either."

And then, the man had killed himself. Drove that same hammer through his very own skull.

*"You know, Tommy, I want that TNT to blow me up as well. It's fitting end for a villain, don't you think? But I'll have won, oh, I'll have won that war nonetheless!"*

Wilbur is the man, alright, Tommy thinks. A sickening feeling pools inside of him.

But.

Tommy *was* Theseus, once upon a time. Tommy doesn't think he is Theseus any longer. He doesn't remember any part of the tale about Theseus leaving his country willingly to live with his family on another continent.

"Come on, Wilbur, don't be an idiot," Tommy says. *Don't be an idiot yourself.* "Of course Phil wants you around. He would have killed you otherwise."

Slowly, his hand crawls towards the saw. He picks it up, stands up, and begins cutting planks again.

"It's like I'm not here," Wilbur says. To himself, or no one, or the world, Tommy never has any idea. He's used to his strange ramblings, but it doesn't mean they don't creep him out.

Tommy hates it.

"Stop that," Tommy said. "Just pack the fucking mud, Wilbur. It's not hard. Don't think about anything else."

"But L'Man--"

"L'Manberg is *far* away, and we are *never* going anywhere near that green bastard *ever* again unless it's to *beat the fucking shit out of him*, and even then *you're* not coming with us!" Tommy snaps. His hands are shaking.

Dimly, he thinks that this might be dangerous. He could cut his hands off with the saw, or cut *something*, with a shaking grip and sharp object and even sharper temper. It's one of the first things Phil taught him; *don't hold weapons when you're not thinking straight, unless you have to fight.*

He tries to let go. Wilbur has a terrified, stricken look on his face, like L'Manberg has blown up all over again and he's forced the clean through its rubble, forced to prepare and bury all the dead bodies that came along with it.

Tommy focuses again on the wood in front of him, and continues sawing.

"Don't think about L'Manberg, Wilbur," he says. "It's what got us into that whole fucking mess in the first place."

His entire body is shaking now. Part of it is fear, incredulity, even - back in Pogtopia, Tommy could never have imagined even *giving* Wilbur the orders, dictating what he could and could not say and having it followed. Wilbur had called all the shots. If not him, then Dream.

It is always *someone*.

This is - this is new, Tommy realizes. And it makes him scared. He doesn't know if he likes it, even though his mind tells him he should.

Wilbur doesn't respond.

~\*~

Techno and Phil eventually drag back several more trees, and they begin the framework for a room.

Nails aren't needed for log cabins, though they throw in a few anyway for good measure. A pillar log of support is firmly sunk into the middle of the cabin.

"How many layers do you want?" Techno asks as he fits a long, pale plank across the top of the support log, and on the triangular frames on each side of the cabin.

"At least two," Phil calls back. "Use your judgement."

Techno pulls out some nails, and begins hammering.

They also agreed on making an upper attic, so sleeping space would be less crowded. Phil puts together an actual ladder, and they lay a flat foundation of planks across the top of the cabin first. He, Phil, and Tommy walk across it afterwards, testing strength. Eventually, a second layer of planks and additional nails are added.

Techno hopes they don't run out of nails soon. That would mean going to the village, where they could undoubtedly buy more.

Eventually, a steep, slanted roof is built as well, two layers of wood overlapping for an airtight seal. He and Tommy cling to the top and knock to test the stability of each area.

Sometime during all this, Phil builds a campfire in front of the cabin and cooks some ptarmigans Techno down has shot down, along with some mushrooms and watercress.

Everything they began - the roof, the attic, reinforcement of the cabin - is completed just as the sun sets. The cracks between the logs are packed with mud and wood, and the roof is about as stable and sturdy as Techno and Tommy can reasonably make it.

The door is also stronger, reinforced with more planks and a locking system of metal rods.

There is a pile of spare wood planks and logs stacked outside, as well as a separate pile of small branches and leaves, bark and wood chips. Fire kindling.

There is no way the monsters can break through now, Techno decides. It's cold, but that can be fixed soon also.

It doesn't mean he'll sleep. But he can rest a little easier now.

The end of their second day in the mountains ends with more soup, Techno and Wilbur climbing up into the attic with a lantern and bundles of wool blankets, and a relatively peaceful night for all of them.

~\*~

On the third day, they lay the foundation for plans. Large plans.

“The faster we can have a proper house, the better,” Phil says. “A large one with room to expand for more.”

“Ideally, we want to take advantage of that view Tommy pointed out,” Techno says. He eyes the area up and down, mentally mapping dimensions in his head. “Once we get a second floor going, it’ll be high enough to have a view of any intruders from that direction.”

“So, like this?”

Phil takes a stick with the end dipped in dripping mud, and roughly sketches a large box shape across the rocks and dull green grass. The right side borders their cabin and stretches beyond its back as well.

“That looks good,” Techno says. “Tommy’s idea was actually a really good one. A fireplace on the left side of the cabin would have complicated things.”

Tommy’s shoulders raise just a tiny bit.

~\*~

With winter already here, a farm is unfeasible. But there’s still plenty to do.

A fireplace, first of all. Techno takes a pickaxe and carefully mines a sunken indent in a part of the floor on the middle of the cabin’s right side. They gather more stones and mud and pack them together, and begin to build it up.

They’ll be living in the cabin for a good while.

Phil painstakingly seals every crack and possible loose area he could find, and instructs his sons to do the same. They make the stones at least two layers thick and slowly build up to the top, filling and packing everything between with mud and clay, ending with a small chimney.

When it’s finished, Phil splashes a bit of water on the surrounding walls, and on some pieces of wood just outside the curved shape of the opening.

He boils stew over the flame and breathes a sigh of relief when no trails of steam waft around them.

~\*~

“Is this tall enough?” Tommy asks, gripping his legs around the top of the fence tightly. Techno glances up, blinking at him with that familiar expression of perplexity.

“What?” Tommy scowls. “Getting mad about nothing again?”

Techno blinks. “No. I just didn’t expect you to ask if you were doing something right.”



Tommy felt another sear of annoyance inside him, that frustration bubbling up again.

“Well, if you don’t want me to ask then fine! I’ll just do whatever I fucking want,” he snaps.

*Hold it together, Tommy*, he quickly shushes to himself. *Prove those motherfuckers wrong.*

“Well, I never said that,” Techno says. “Yeah, it’s tall enough. Just make sure you leave enough room inside.”

“Right, right,” Tommy mutters, and prepares to lower himself down.

After the fireplace was done and meal eaten, they (minus Wilbur, because of fucking course,) had decided to fence the area around the cabin and the foundations of their large house.

Nothing large or towering - just a wooden barrier that goes up to Tommy’s chin, reinforced to keep out monsters. Most of them are far too dumb to climb anything, and Techno has said he has a plan for those that can.

They include a large enough empty space inside as well, for any other immediate structures they might need through the winter.

It included their horses, which have been forced to huddle outside with leads around a fence post. They had been trusting that any neighs of pain would be enough to wake Techno up and into action, but with a fenced area their animals could rest easier as well.

Tommy wonders what Phil’s overall plan is as he hammers another plank into the ground with his axe, and then sharpens the top to a triangular point.

He resolves to ask soon.

By the end of the day, they don’t finish the fenced perimeter, large as it is, but they get the beginnings of it done. The planks are driven deep into the ground, the tops a row of spikes.

Good enough, Tommy decides that night.

~\*~

The fourth day brings more work.

“We should prepare for crops anyway,” Techno says. “The streams and river are nearby, but not near enough.”

“So you’re suggesting a canal?” Phil asks.

“A reservoir as well.”

“With fish,” Tommy says. “I want fish. A fish pond.”

“Sure,” Techno shrugs. Fish can be handled easily enough. Phil gives them both a strange look, and glances back at Wilbur.

Wilbur, who is still slumped and leaning against the door of their cabin. He doesn’t seem to be paying attention.

Wilbur rarely pays attention, nowadays, though the strangest of things pull him out of his trance. Like mentions of going down to mine, or glimpses of the village nestled in the valley below.

“It means we’ll still have to go to the stream to get drinking and cooking water,” Phil sighs. “But alright.”

“We can always make another one,” Techno says.

After some deliberation, the four of them begin carving out a large half-circle in the ground a little ways away from the front of the cabin, within the fenced area, shoveling up loose dirt and prying off rocks. Those materials are piled separately and kept nearby - building materials, after all, shouldn’t be wasted in a haphazard scatter.

After it’s around 5 feet deep at its center and 6 feet across, they dig a small channel to the large stream nearby. It’s just a dozen yards or so away, but that difference will be felt when they try to water crops in the spring.

As Tommy shovels the last bits of dirt away, a trickle of water floods from the stream and into the channel, towards the hole. They continue shoveling more, and the trickle turns into its own steady stream, bubbling softly.

Soon, they had a pond. Phil takes a piece of wooden plank and shoves it into the channel once the water has filled up to prevent future fish from escaping. They can create a better system later.

~\*~

Eventually, Phil hopes that they can spread some sort of light source throughout the entire island. But for now they’ll have to make do with some torches ready to be lit at a moment’s notice, and Techno.

Speaking of which.

“We need to go down to the village eventually,” Phil points out as the four of them walk through the forest. “Even if we can mine redstone for permanent lamps, we still need to buy animals. And seeds. And glass. And food, eventually.”

A stray maple leaf, somehow still a deep green in the winter chill of the air, falls in front of him. Phil stops and blinks as the sunlight reflects off its shimmering dew, a tiny droplet of rainbows dance for a fleeting moment before his eyes.

“We don’t need to today,” Techno says. “There’s enough forage around here still, and I can hunt pretty much anything.”

“I’m in favor of waiting,” Tommy says. “People are so fucking annoying.”

Wilbur is silent.

“Wil?” Phil prompts.

“I don’t care,” he says flatly. Phil frowns, but decides now isn’t the time to poke into it.

They finally stop at their destination, the clear, rippling river that cuts through the shielded area of land they’d made the beginnings of their home on.

Dark shapes flash below the surface. Rocks both smooth and jagged jut out from the water, their sides a haze of green and gray. The river is relatively small, and flowing slower in the more level elevation - though Phil can hear the distant roar of a waterfall.

He plops down the two large buckets he'd been carrying, and Tommy does the same. Techno unslings his bag, pulls out four fish rods and a net, and holds them out.

~\*~

When Techno stands in the water, the unusual fiery heat of his body spreads and scares all surrounding life away, a beacon that proclaims destruction and death. He has to lurk at the edges instead, net in hand and eyes trained, to quickly scoop up live catches.

It's a fitting metaphor for his life, he thinks. Oftentimes he's left wondering why Phil ever bothered to raise him in the first place, or why Wilbur and Tommy still want to stick around.

Perhaps his net is just that strong, his grip just that tight. It's a thought that plagues in his nightmares, the rare few times he does sleep.

A vision of green eyes and a pearly white mask flashes in his mind as Techno dumps into the bucket a net full of three rainbow trout, scales glinting like mirrors in the sun.

~\*~

They catch fish until the sun begins to set, and come back to the pond with bucketfuls of them. Most are released into it, alive and darting, while 3 are selected and speared with a trident to become dinner.

~\*~

On the fifth night the winds howl with snow. Phil wakes up in the morning to find their cabin covered in sheets of cold white, and they resolutely push forth to make more fires and clear the area.

~\*~

By the end of the week, they have some chairs and a table built for the cabin, and the stone foundations of the large house started.

The fencing and lighting of their marked area is complete as well, ensuring even further protection from mobs. Techno lays wire traps on the tops, and every morning they're greeted with the sight of a few giant, half-dead spiders twitching weakly in the metal snares.

"Gross," Tommy wrinkles his nose as Techno slices through a dead arthropod and begins unwinding string from somewhere in its abdomen.

"String is string," Techno shrugs. "I can use this to kill more of its brethren, by the way. Set noose traps. It's dramatic irony at its finest, I tell you."

"Tommy, help me pluck out the eyes," Phil says. "You too, Wilbur, help Techno with the string. These are valuable resources."

Wilbur walks past him, kneeling next to another spider with a sword in hand.

Tommy sighs, but rolls up his sleeves. His red and white shirt has long since been replaced by a white wool sweater, and he shivers slightly as he exposes his bare arms to the biting air. It feels like tiny

pinpricks, invisible needles along his skin.

“The things I do for you guys,” he mutters, and Techno snorts.

“Get used to it. I’m planning on trapping some zombies next as a food source for some dogs.”

~\*~

In a large patch of deep, dense dirt some ways behind the cabin, beneath a towering oak and surrounded by dense thickets, away from the eyes of his family, Tommy takes a shovel and digs up the land. He plants each of the ten moobloom bulbs, one by one, and carefully covers them again.

Mooblooms are spring-blooming plants, and Tommy hopes - well, it could be too late, and soil too coarse, and weather too cold - but he hopes at least some will make it through to flower in the spring.

## Chapter End Notes

As always, feedback appreciated but no pressure!

Longer times between updates because it’s finals season in schools!!! YAYY They’re not until early January for me but school has been picking up pace pretty fast. The first semester is 3 weeks shorter than normal which means we’re going through a final push of really fast and condensed material right now, which also means busy test time. So yeah, sorry for the later updates.

Man, I am so looking forward to 2nd semester, especially towards the later end when my extracurriculars also wrap up. It’s longer, which means a thinner workload overall, and they put all my easy classes there lmao. It’ll be a much more chillax time.

# nobody wants to be here and nobody wants to leave

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

When Phil wakes, it is to the soft humming of music, rhythmic and flowing like river water over stone.

He turns and opens his eyes. Tommy is hunched over the jukebox Phil had taken out from his ender chest last night, hugging the frayed edges with a closed expression of near fervence. His eyes are shut, face set in a peaceful expression. The first in his sleep since they left L'Manberg.

Phil manages a smile. With a soft yawn, he drags himself up, unlatches the lock on the door, and pushes it.

It gives way the slightest bit, but it doesn't budge after another hard push.

He fights the urge to roll his eyes, and pulls the door inward instead.

A wall of white taller than his knees greets him, submerging the ground beneath its ocean. Phil takes a moment to appreciate Techno's idea of placing planks of wood over their fish reservoir, not that it'll eventually matter all that much.

On the far edge of the cabin, tucked in a row from the fireplace to the corner, are four shovels. It isn't like they are new to the concept of preparation, after all.

~\*~

Thankfully, they all have clothing that will suit them well enough for the cold. Techno has dug through his ender chest and pulled out clothes from his Antarctic Empire days. A furry, hooded blue cloak, heavy woolen garments, boots of soft deerskin, and winter gloves. Phil has a similar outfit, with the addition of a soft trapper hat.

Tommy and Wilbur make do with Techno and Phil's long coats as well as their own, along with boots and gloves Techno had had the foresight to purchase some time during their numerous stops on the way here.

Tommy also receives, after a moment of deliberation, Techno's trapper hat. Techno doesn't need it anywhere near as much, anyway, and it will be worth it to hear just a few less complaints.

Wilbur declines Phil's offer.

~\*~

"It's so fucking cold," Tommy complains, kicking a drift of snow away. The flakes sparkle like tiny gemstones in the sunlight for a few fleeting moments before dissipating into nothingness.

"Tell that to the weather," Techno huffs. His shoveling is the opposite of Tommy's - steady, focused, and fast. "Get shoveling unless you want us to be trapped inside one day."

Because that is the big thing - the cold isn't the biggest threat, and neither is a lack of supplies. Rather, it's the snow drowning everything, mpeding all progress until well into spring. They have to shovel

their area clear after every storm - if not, it'll eventually be impossible to shovel at all.

Snow stacks, and it stacks *hard*. Back during his and Phil's days as rulers of the Antarctic Empire, Techno learned just how brutal it could be. Left to its own devices, to pile up and up - they will eventually be faced with a towering wall as hard as packed ice. It *becomes* packed ice.

And it becomes a *pain* to remove. Constant fire is the best bet - otherwise, taking a pickaxe to it is almost as notoriously laborious as mining obsidian.

And so, they must begin the work now.

"I'm bored already," Tommy says eventually. They're almost halfway done shoveling their fenced area, with Phil taking to carrying buckets of excess snow and flying them to dump over ledges, while the rest were packed along the fences. Techno has *just* begun allowing himself to hope that maybe he can carry out the task in blissful quiet.

"What alternate reality have you been living in in the past week?" he asks, suppressing yet another sigh.

"One where I'm not freezing my fucking fingers off," Tommy grumbles. "Bet I wouldn't have to deal with this if I had stayed back in L'Manberg."

Techno pauses in his shoveling for the briefest second, and feels Wilbur still in movement next to him as well.

"Wonder what Tubbo's doing right now..." Tommy continues, paying them no mind. His shoveling is far steadier than before. "Probably something more fun than this."

It sounds normal. It sound like his usual complaining. But who is Techno to understand?

A few moments later, however, Wilbur's shoulders slowly lower. He goes back to shoveling, eyes dulling into that blank, filmy state again.

Techno blinks. Wilbur may be... unstable, but he is still Wilbur. He would know, wouldn't he?

Some part of him pricks with unease at the idea of trusting the judgement, as it always does, but Techno has few options. It's clear that pursuing the matter on his end will not result in any favorable outcomes.

He supposes that this will have to be enough. Another reminder of his terrible inadequacies.

~\*~

They eventually realize the utility of using the snow as a barrier method in themselves and begin packing them in a more purposeful order along the fences. The snow layer eventually becomes higher than the fence in some areas, though it can be attributed largely to Tommy trying to build "an actual fucking wall."

By the time they are done shoveling and shaping, 2 hours later, with the snow layer left only a finger or so deep in most areas around the cabin, Phil can tell that Tommy and Wilbur are ready to slump back into their bed and sleep the day away.

They haven't had to deal with major environmental challenges for a few years now, with L'Manberg and exploration of warmer areas, and thus also lack the experiences he and Techno have gone

through. As he watches Tommy snuggle into his blankets to warm up, he hopes that this winter will provide a more stress free challenge for them.

Something calming. Something Phil can help with, in any capacity.

After all, nature's troubles are far, far easier for Phil to protect them from than politics. One he has some knowledge in playing, but the other is his domain.

"Techno?"

"Yes?"

Phil looks up. "Could you hunt something for us? I'll get ready to prepare breakfast. Or lunch, I guess."

"Sure."

As he readies a knife to slice some leftover onions and chickweed, he hears a faint click, and the whining of metal hinges.

The fire is still going strong, and the cabin left with a warm, dry atmosphere. He can hear Tommy muttering faintly to himself, while a honing of his ears detects the faint scratching of quills on paper from upstairs in the attic.

It is familiar, memories easing into him from a decade ago. When they were also just like this. Together, as a family, out of reach of anyone who could even hope to threaten them.

Phil allows himself a smile as he walls the vegetables off the cutting board and into a pot with his knife.

This... this is much more familiar territory. Different, but still so familiar. He hopes he can get used to it.

~\*~

Techno is back with two marmots and a rabbit in a matter of minutes. It's impressive, even for him.

They eat in relative cherriness, between Tommy's usual comments and Techno's quips while Phil tries to hold back laughter.

Despite it all, there is still an aching hole in their conversations now, one Phil finds impossible to ignore.

Like a splotch of ashen darkness against a bright yellow painting. Wilbur always eats in silence now, unless prompted with questions. Even then, he responds to the majority of them with closed eyes and faint, unintelligible mumbles.

Phil feels a gaping pain in those moments, when he tries and fails to elicit some sort of reaction, but he is at a loss even after several weeks. With no idea what to say or do, what drew Wilbur out of his deadened state those rare few times.

It's a tiny pool of dread along the same lines as when he realized with increased certainty that he was too late to stop his son from blowing up a nation. But slower, lurking in flickering, silent shadows just out of sight, crawling closer with every wayward glance.

Phil hates this, this sense of... *irresponsibility*. Of not knowing what to do. It's so stupid - he's never *not known* what to do before. His life has always had clear objectives, clear outcomes - survive and thrive. It shouldn't be this difficult.

He can only keep trying. And he *will* keep trying.

Phil has resolved to be there for Wilbur for as long as he can. He has failed once, after all, and he will not allow himself to stand idly by again.

~\*~

After the meal, Techno decides to broach the obvious subject.

"So, we need to explore that hole in our floor," he says, leaning against the table.

They had placed a large plank of wood over it, when they first made the cabin, and the past week of busyness has rendered it undisturbed. But there is much waiting for them down there, and in the winter months that could become crucial.

"I agree," Phil says. He takes one last drink and sets down a near empty mug. "At the very least it'll be a good storage space, not to mention I heard a stream down there. So that's water covered in case we can't go out."

Both of them turn, slowly, to Tommy.

Tommy scowls. "What?"

His eyes are shaded dark in a way Techno is both wholly familiar and unfamiliar with. L'Manberg's revolution has sliced deep into the childhood naivety and Pogtopia hollowed it all out in smoke and terrible screaming.

He wonders who the boy sitting across from him really is, and if he can be considered a boy at all.

"Are you..." Phil pauses, blinking slowly. He shoots a quick glance at Techno, who has to shrug back in a gesture of cluelessness.

It's frustrating, being unable to give Phil the answers he needs. Being *useless*.

"Are you alright with coming down with us? Or do you want to stay up here?" he finally asks Tommy.

Tommy stares at the two of them for a long, drawn moment, and then slowly turns to Wilbur.

Wilbur, who is still quietly picking around the last of his rabbit meat with a fork. He hasn't shown any signs of interest the entire exchange.

An expression crosses Tommy's face, one Techno can't recall seeing on him before. But it feels like he has too, somehow.

*He looks like Phil*, Techno realizes after a few seconds. Phil, when he was clutching Wilbur's sword against his chest, mouth gaping in a horrified show of shock. Standing in front of Wilbur. Hearing his own son beg for an end to his life, each word picked up by Techno's traitorously sensitive ears.



That same quiet expression, a steel plated armor concealing a volcano of fears and terrors and panicked decisions. Like they were battling their worst nightmares within themselves. It's a feeling which Techno hopes he will never have to experience himself, though he isn't sure he'll recognize it either way.

"Sure," Tommy finally mutters, and quickly adds in a louder tone, "I'll come. Down. With you two."

*With you two.*

"Wilbur," Techno says, nudging his shoulder. "Do you want to come down with us?"

Wilbur takes a moment to respond, like his consciousness has been partially sucked to some other plane of existence.

"I don't... it's not L'Manberg," he says. "Not even Pogtopia. It's all so... different. But not."

Techno has only a flashing second of concern before Tommy suddenly slams a fist down onto the table. The plates clatter, spinning minutely along the surface, clinking echoes to accompany the harsh, almost vicious thump.

Wilbur flinches back, a small and frightened move. Techno doesn't. Phil hitches a breath.

The slam was jarring and sudden, though weaker than what Techno would have done for intimidation. But there's a tremble to Tommy's breath, and some reignited flare in his eyes. Flare of what, he doesn't know, but it can't be anything good.

"Fuck you, Wilbur," Tommy snarls. Tiny crystals wobble at the edge of his eyes as he staggers up. "I fucking hate you. I fucking hate you so much, and you still don't care at all, do you? Even after Phil - Phil worked so hard to get us here and with everything and you still do fucking nothing like the shitty, *cowardly bitch* you are."

He twists around and flings back the wooden plank, snatching a nearby lantern in the process with such a ferocity Techno thinks for a moment it might crack the glass.

"I'm going down," Tommy snarls, and his eyes linger on Wilbur's pale, shocked face. "If you want to die in a fucking ditch somewhere so much then *fine*. Sit on your ass and do nothing-"

"He has helped a lot," Phil tries, before quickly falling quiet at Tommy's next yell.

"Oh no, no he *hasn't*, Phil, not really, not how it matters. *Not at all*." Tommy's words are ragged, and sharp and pained, the product of months resentment and shadowed fears directed into a *weapon*. Techno has seen such outbursts and knows nothing good usually comes of them,

"All he knows now is *L'Manberg* this and *I'm so sad* that and he doesn't *think* about us, or the consequences, or the future at all! So *fine*, let him keep talking or thinking about his stupid, precious symphony, because I'm *done*. I'm not dealing with shit this any fucking longer."

With that, Tommy whips back around and practically shoves himself into the ravine opening. Techno is almost impressed by the speed at which he slides down. Crunching, clattering gravel echoes in his wake, sound slowly fading with each passing second.

They're all quiet, for the next few seconds. Techno reaches out and places a hand on Wilbur's shoulder for just long enough to feel the warmth through the linen shirt.

Then, he grabs his pickaxe and sword, and stands up.

“Someone needs to make sure Tommy doesn’t get himself killed,” he tells Phil, before grabbing a nearby lantern and matchbox. Phil nods silently before turning to face Wilbur again.

As he carefully lowers himself into the hole, dimly mapping the dimensions for a rope ladder at the back of his mind, Techno takes a deep breath. He tries to slow the racing of his heart, an anomaly he can’t afford to get hung over right now.

Phil doesn’t go after him.

## Chapter End Notes

Still very busy but here, have a shorter chapter. Was supposed to have another scene but it’s different enough that I’ve decided I can justify placing it in the next chapter instead. As always, no pressure but feedback appreciated!!

# within the ice there are cracks to be traced

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The walls of the ravine are cold and wavy gray and twisting with shadows from every perspective. Jagged lines and grainy surfaces that leave a primal, shivering feeling seeping through Tommy as he trails the depths of this institution. His mind opened bare to an erratic melody.

He doesn't turn back once as he pushes forward into the unknown, clutching almost painfully onto his lantern's wire handle, shutting his senses from the scene behind him, head spinning around and *forward, forward, forward.*

Space, quiet, *away* - Tommy stifles a gasp as he abruptly hits a wall of musty softness. His fingers come away with bits of dirt and green.

Moss and mushrooms and the occasional tiny weed, crawled all over the towering walls around him. A dead end.

*Don't look, don't hear, don't think about what's back behind you-*

He fails. Wilbur's gaping mouth and wide, blank eyes stare, and judge, and stare some more behind his hazy vision.

But Tommy doesn't care, shouldn't care, should be able to let go easily, he had hurt Tommy so much, *why wasn't this working-*

He grips the lantern handle even tighter, until it's slicing into his palms. His hands shake and the thin whines of scraping metal shake along with him in a mocking tempo.

The light flashes higher for just a moment, flaring his shadow into rippling plumes on the stone. And in it, Tommy sees a towering blackness creep forward even as the light subsides again.

"Go away," he chokes out, and the blackness stops. He wipes his eyes with a fluffy sleeve, the wool a moment of gentle respite.

"And what are you planning to do?" Techno asks. There's a rumble to his voice Tommy hasn't heard since Pogtopia.

Well, it's fitting, huh? Another cruel joke by the universe, he can pretend, but Tommy has long since given up on ideas of fate or destiny.

The thought solidifies his resolve enough to drag himself around. Techno peers down at him, crimson eyes with the faintest hint of glow in the darkness. His long pink hair is loose and sprawled, littered with tangles and clumps of gravel that wasn't there before.

"I'm not Wilbur, if that's what you think," Tommy growls. "Not gonna off myself like a fucking idiot."

"Alright."

"Great. Now leave me alone."

Techno tilts his head and takes a step forward. Tommy stands his ground and stares him back in the eyes.

“Are you sure about that?” Techno eventually asks. He unslings a pickaxe from his back and tilts the handle toward him.

Tommy stares for a few moments longer.

He still feels cold, but it’s fading to a different kind of cold now. The kind that he experiences when he first steps outside into fresh snowfall, that flushes his cheeks a dusty pink and makes his body want to move, to ripple and feel *alive* .

Tommy takes the pickaxe.

“No,” he admits.

~\*~

“Tommy-” Wilbur falls silent as Techno disappears from sight.

Phil slowly sits him down on a bed and wraps a cold, rattling wing around him.

“Wil,” he says. Wilbur doesn’t respond.

Phil closes his eyes. Tommy has a point, even if he didn’t voice it the way he should have.

He’s starting to see a trend with that, and the pool of guilt overflows again. Perhaps if he’d spent more time, more patience, more support and understanding-

It’s always too late to go back to what ifs. He has to work with what he has now.

“Wilbur, look at me,” Phil says, and when Wilbur doesn’t respond again he reaches out and tilts his head to meet his eyes.

Wilbur suddenly flinches, a bit of gray dispersing within the film.

Oh. This is worse than he thought.

Phil takes a deep breath. *Start simple.*

“How many fingers am I holding up?” he asks.

“F-four.”

“Now?”

“Seven.”

Phil nods. He leans closer and runs a cold hand through Wilbur’s soft, fluffy hair.

“Focus on the present, Wilbur,” he says. He combs through Wilbur’s hair again, just a bit tighter this time.

“Where are you?”

“In... a cabin.”

“And?”

Wilbur leans further against Phil, taking a shuddering breath. Phil picks at the beginning of a braid.

“Novixl, the continent.”

“And where are we not at?”

Wilbur bits his lip. He’s still perceptive, when he’s focusing. He knows what answer Phil is looking for. There’s relief in that thought, that Phil clings to desperately even as he threads his hair again and again.

“Around traitors,” Wilbur finally says.

Phil takes deep breath, slow and steady as he can maintain it.

“Wilbur.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You don’t need to apologize to me, Wilbur.”

“Sure.” The response is slow and delayed. Phil’s fingers twist a little faster, sliding and looping.

“Wilbur.”

“I’m sorry.”

He sighs, and tightens his pull for just a final tiny moment before letting go of Wilbur’s hair. He suppresses a shiver.

“Do you want to go back to L’Manberg?”

Wilbur looks away.

“Wilbur, please answer me. Just try.”

“Not - Not L’Manberg,” he says. “Somewhere. I don’t know.”

“You-”

“I don’t want to talk about this anymore,” Wilbur says.

“But-”

“Please. Stop it.”

Phil forces himself to relax, and pulls Wilbur closer. He feels so, so cold, a statue of ice against his arms. It’s frightening. The kind of lurking terror that plagues him through every moment of sleep and waking awareness.

“Okay. But stay with me.”

Wilbur doesn't respond. Phil hugs him tight, and doesn't know what more to say, and knows he can't take any of it as agreement.

His hands are freezing. He hopes Wilbur doesn't notice. He hopes he does. He's not sure which would be worse.

~\*~

"So, what exactly were you planning to do down here with no pickaxe and a single lantern?" Techno asks as he chips away the stone. It's like his shoveling, preciseness and perfection with every movement.

"None of your business," Tommy says. His right hand jolts in pain again, and he pauses briefly before resuming.

Unfortunately, nothing gets past the *great* and *mighty* Technoblade, so Tommy is abruptly grabbed by the wrist before he can swing his pickaxe again.

"That's the second time," Techno says. "Show me your hand."

Tommy scowls, but turns his hand over. A dotty splotch of red covers his palm, mostly dark and crusty save for a line of fresh new blood that glints in nearby lantern light.

"Tommy."

"I can handle it," Tommy says.

"You told me you weren't like Wilbur," Techno says, brows furrowing. His voice twists towards the end, the way Tubbo's did whenever Tommy broke or set fire to something he wasn't supposed to.

"I'm not," Tommy protests, because he *isn't*. He's not a coward. "It's not like it'll kill me or something."

"Infection."

"We have gapples and potions."

"Better safe than sorry," Techno says, and suddenly there's a vial of bright pink liquid in his other hand. He uncorks it with his thumb.

"Stay still."

Tommy rolls his eyes, but complies.

To his dismay, he winces slightly as Techno wipes the blood away with a gloved finger. A few drops of the healing potion is quickly dripped, and Tommy watches slowly as his skin knits itself back together.

"Why didn't you say anything?" Techno asks.

Tommy picks up his pickaxe and begins swinging again.

"Tommy."

“Didn’t want to bother anyone,” he mutters. “Already said, not like I was gonna die from it or some stupid shit like that.”

Really, isn’t Techno supposed to be the tough one here? Yet he freaks out over even the tiniest injuries - especially Tommy’s - to a ridiculous degree. Maybe it’s all part of that mindset of feverish paranoia he always applies to everything.

Techno tugs on his shoulder, and Tommy turns back to him.

“You need to tell us about things like this, or at least treat it yourself,” he says flatly. “That wasn’t just a tiny cut, Tommy - if you were attacked you wouldn’t have been able to hold your sword properly. And wounds usually get worse the longer you leave it untreated.”

“You think I don’t fucking know that?” Tommy snaps, waving a hand at the stone walls around them. They’re whispering again - but at least it’s now to the both of them. To his satisfaction, Techno recoils back just the slightest bit.

They’re both silent for a few minutes, and Techno resumes his mining alongside Tommy.

They don’t talk for a while. This area of the ravine is all tight corridors and they had decided to widen it for more convenient travel, as well as gathering the coal and veins of iron inside it.

"Just because you don't have a big problem, doesn't mean it's not worth addressing," Techno says finally. "Especially to-"

"Not this again," Tommy grumbles, but Techno's frown smothers any further comments.

"Tommy," Techno says. "What do you want?"

"What kind of question is that?"

Is Techno diving into one of his weird tangents on characters and development and themes again? Tommy isn't sure if that would be worse than a lecture. At least with the lecture, he could argue back with actual fucking points he understands.

"Think about it," Techno says. "Preferably right now."

"You're such a dick."

But Tommy indulges him. So what does he want?

His discs are the obvious answer, but no - he's not getting either of the two original ones back, with Dream and Tubbo both so far out of reach. It's stupid to try and he knows. And, to some shame, Tommy is deeply, deeply relieved at the fact.

So much struggle has been poured into those discs - struggle that Dream has dangled over his head like carrots and sticks, honeyed words and veiled threats at every turn. In a way, Tommy feels almost triumphant, that he can detach himself from the discs at all, that he has come this far. That he has accepted Phil's replacements.

It's like he let them go along with Tubbo.

...Tubbo. Mr. President of L'Manberg.

In an ideal world, Dream would never have declared war on L'Manberg. They would have gotten independence peacefully, and Wilbur would be a good president while Tommy and Tubbo helped alongside him. Maybe Techno or Phil would visit, stay a while, and Phil finally tells his other sons how proud he is of them instead of always fawning over Techno-

Tommy slams that train of thought down with gritted teeth. The world is far from ideal, and at least Phil *is* paying more attention now. Even if it might be too late.

But Tommy has clawed and clawed for everything, for every inch of ground only for everyone else to snatch it all back at the first opportunity.

"You know, L'Manberg not being blown up sounds great," Tommy says, giving Techno a glare. "I haven't forgotten."

Techno shrugs. "I don't know why all of you are still so surprised. I *said* I was out to destroy its government."

And no one could do anything about it as Techno had spawned those withers. They had all yelled, had all begged, but they couldn't *do* anything, really, so paralyzed by the threat of blood and violence.

"Wish everyone would treat me like that," Tommy says, though he doubts he means it. At least, not literally.

He waves away a cloud of gray dust and slams his pickaxe down a little harder than usual.

Tommy admires Techno, *envies* him in some twisting way that persists even after the withers on the 16th. He's never questioned just *why* he wants to be like Techno so much, be in a position of his where terror is struck into the hearts of all those who meet him save for his closest family and most dangerous rivals.

Tommy, contrary to what some might believe, clings to people like a lifeline because they *are* a lifeline. He lives in constant terror of being abandoned. Techno's not the opposite - he's surprisingly similar in his fears, but unlike Tommy no one ever uses it against him. It seems that no one can use anything against him.

...oh.

When he decided he didn't want to go after his discs anymore, had looked at the two shiny new replacements Phil presented him and accepted - Tommy had felt terrible, yes, and scared, and guilty and frustrated - but he had also felt an immense satisfaction that seemed so wrong and yet so right. Because *he* had made the decision, all for himself, and no one else could have stopped him.

The biggest source of control over Tommy, over *L'Manberg*, really, gone in an instant with a simple shrug. Just like that.

"I want - I want control," Tommy whispers, and he stops.

Techno raises an eyebrow in the dim light.

"Do I need to worry about another Dream?" he asks. Tommy shoves him into a wall, the movement made with an ease that can only mean Techno let him.

"Oh, shut up," he says. "I want - I want to kick fuckers like Dream in the face and not - I don't know, have my home burned down for it."



Techno stifles another snort, to Tommy's annoyance, but straightens himself up and looks down into his eyes again.

"True," he says. "You've always been the desperate puppy around the server. Running after someone else and following their orders, even if you try to pretend otherwise. Those discs mattered a lot, huh?"

"Sure, whatever," Tommy says, ignoring the fact that Techno called him a puppy. The line of questioning squeezes his stomach uncomfortably, but he tries to brush that off as well. He's not scared. He can face a little questioning from Techno. He can - he can answer how he wants. What's Techno going to do, kill his nonexistent pets if he says something he doesn't like?

Something like exhilaration rises within Tommy. He begins mining again. Rocks crumble to his feet.

"Hmm. The leash."

"It's a leash I bit off with my own fucking teeth, if you love this weird metaphor so much," Tommy snaps.

"Well, there's your first victory," Techno says, and Tommy blinks.

"Huh?"

"Well, now that you're no longer attached to the original Cat and Mellohi, they're essentially useless," Techno says. "Dream can't threaten you in that way anymore, and neither can Tubbo."

"Tubbo wouldn't-"

"Tubbo's a president. What if Dream starts threatening L'Manberg again? As long as you were attached to them, those discs had bargaining power," Techno says. He pauses and blinks, slowly.

"Now that you've cut ties with those objects, they have one - or two - less things to threaten you with. And you, Tommy, have begun to even the playing field."

"Is that what it's about?" Tommy asks, huffing. "Not caring about anything in life?"

Techno snorts. "Even I can't be bothered to live life that. I mean to cut unnecessary ties, Tommy. Minimize them. Your attachment to those discs were, quite frankly, ridiculous. The rarity of them was only ever contained within the Dream SMP, and they never served much functional purpose."

Tommy stops.

"So what kind of... *leashes* do you have?" he asks. "You left Carl and those other horses back in the SMP too, so that can't be it."

"Well, it's not generally not a good idea to let others know your weaknesses or strengths," Techno says. "But take a wild guess Tommy. I'm sure you can puzzle it out."

"Your stupid adherence to your no governments thing?" Tommy raises an eyebrow, and thinks that he's been spending too much time around Techno.

"I'm not taking down governments right now," Techno says mildly. "In fact, I left that for something else. Someone else. A few someones."

"...oh." Tommy pauses. "Wait! You weren't on our side in the revolution!"

“You guys weren’t in any real danger then. Or at least, not you. Phil’s not the only one who regrets how Wilbur’s situation was handled.”

It is strange, to hear Techno talk so openly about... relationships. His *emotions*.

*Their* emotions. It isn’t as nerve wracking or cringy as Tommy thought it would be.

“So I don’t - this is still confusing,” Tommy says. “I shouldn’t-”

“It’s not my job to dictate what you should care about, though a little help with the Wilbur situation would be appreciated,” Techno says. “But you’ve been on the losing side the entire time you’ve been in Dream’s territory. Dream fosters a system of control and power, and by removing yourself from that system itself, you’ve already won by default. The next step is to prepare for any attempts at forcing new systems onto you, or to tackle the next system yourself first, with better results.”

“You’re making no sense again.”

“I’m making plenty of sense. You just need to think about it,” Techno says. “Dream with that disc means you had a leash on a collar, but it also means he had the handle. So get yourself some handles too, and preferably ones with tougher leashes.”

“Get my own handles,” Tommy muses. In a twisted way, this is beginning to make some sense. Think like a Technoblade, or whatever. “I think I’m already starting to.”

“You are,” Techno agrees. “But you need to do it better. Some handles are not worth their price. And some are not handles at all, though they may seem like so at first.”

Tommy looks down.

“You mean what I said to Wilbur,” he says.

“Yes.”

“He deserves it.”

“Do you care about him, Tommy?”

Tommy stays silent.

“Tommy. Answer me, this is important. *Do you care about Wilbur?*”

Techno grabs his wrist, eyes narrowed. There’s a tightness to his shoulders that wasn’t there before.

Tommy forces himself to continue maintaining eye contact. He won’t give up, he can’t.

“Y - yes,” he mutters. Because despite everything, Wilbur is still his brother, and he had still played a crucial part in raising him.

Tommy misses Wilbur. He wants his brother back - who he used to be, the Wilbur who cheerily sang campfire songs and laughed like the wild wind, and not this pathetic excuse of a ghost that is his current existence. He’s alive, and he doesn’t deserve the privilege of running away from all his problems like a ghost.

“Show it,” Techno says, and lets him go. Tommy slowly leans back.

“...I’m sorry about Wilbur too.”

“We all are. And we need to apologize, including him.” Techno runs a hand through his hair, and frowns. “Things can get better, if we try. And in the right ways.”

“Very fucking helpful.”

“I know.”

“So I should be more... *patient* with Wilbur.”

“And help him be more patient with himself,” Techno says. “You had the right idea, just - don’t tell him to die in a ditch next time. You know how that can go.”

Tommy takes a deep breath. A thundering boom racks his mind and jagged rubble falls around him, but the vision goes just as quickly as it comes.

“I’ll try,” he says. “Fuck the green bitch and his stupid fucking system, right?”

“Right,” Techno grins. “You’re learning.”

~\*~

## Entry 12

*Tommy told me to die today. He also apologized afterwards. He looked sorry. I think he means it, but it doesn’t really matter, does it?*

*I feel really cold. I’ve felt cold since... I don’t remember. Maybe since the election. Maybe before. Maybe I was never warm in the first place. But I feel colder than usual today, and it scares me. I don’t know what to do. It makes me angry. And scared.*

*Do I have the right to feel angry after all this? Why am I angry? Who am I angry at? Everyone, maybe. They all took so much from me. Except Techno or Tommy. Or Phil. Well, maybe Phil. I was supposed to die in L’Manberg and Phil took that away and didn’t let me have it back.*

*I never got L’Manberg back either. I was supposed to win either way and I didn’t. The plan was foolproof in its design - and yet they found a way to penetrate the impenetrable. Ripped it all apart by the seams and flew off with its carcass.*

*Oh, the irony. I’m dead and yet not dead. What does Phil think he can do with a glorified meat sack?*

*I tried singing again, today. When we were shoveling snow and everyone else was far away enough. My voice doesn’t sound the same, it’s so raw and dull and quiet and I hate it. No one likes it when a defeated madman tries to be funny. I tried to write a new song to fit the mood, and that didn’t work out either. To draggy. I can’t hit the notes the way I want. I can’t get away from using something other than an A minor triad. It’s all stuck and stuck and I can’t move away.*

*Another sign I’ve reached my peak, I suppose. Nowhere to go but down.*

*Tommy’s right. I can’t do much of anything that really matters and I can’t bring myself to do anything about that either. I was supposed to - to lead and talk and sing and - entertain, I guess. What else do I*

*do? I can't fight like Techno or survive like Phil or - or even persist like Tommy. He's always been the stronger one between the two of us, full of more resolve than I'll ever be able to scrounge up. So many others would have broken under the weight of everything he's endured. Including me.*

*Who knows, at least history got another failed dictator. Maybe students will laugh over my story one day. They'll also want a conclusion to it. I want a conclusion too.*

*Allegiances are such fickle things. Eret was on our side for real in the beginning. I can tell - or could tell, but the memory still remains. It's one of the ones that hurts the most. One of the few abilities I had, though that deteriorated with the passage of time as well.*

*And Schlatt - we were friends, once. He was such a good actor, before the whole alcoholism spiral. The drunkenness really brought out his true colors. I wish I could have done that too, but Techno kept blocking my attempts. Said it was too dangerous. Cited flammability concerns.*

*All lies, of course, but was I about to fight him? No. I regret that now. Should have tried harder. A heart attack would have spared Phil so much pain.*

*I didn't think to pay close attention to Schlatt when he came around again, promising to endorse us. I was probably already going insane then. The war for independence already sapped so much out of me - I was delusional about many things, but not the fragility of our nation. We were still under Dream's shadow. L'Manberg still, is, probably. That's why it's better as a crater. As long as it's under the control of someone else it's not mine.*

*Can I really blame Eret? He was only ever doing what made sense for his survival. He got kingship and luxury for it. Maybe the rest of us should have taken a page from his book.*

*Isn't that just depressing? The world is one where traitors win and loyalty loses. That's why there's traitors everywhere. That's why it's in Phil, Techno, and Tommy's best interests to just get rid of me. Maybe Phil will finally realize that bird parents commit to their strongest chicks, leaving the weakest to die. Maybe Techno will finally apply that strategic logic he's so famous for. Maybe Tommy will finally give me what I deserve, after fully comprehending everything I have taken away from him.*

*After all, I've proven myself to be the ultimate traitor.*

## Chapter End Notes

haha canon parallels go brr

And I made a tumblr: <https://Interjection.tumblr.com/>

Comments are always appreciated, and I try my best to answer them all. But if for whatever reason you feel like talking to me more or just want to say something in a place that's not the Ao3 comment box, tumblr's the place! Hopefully! I'm still trying to figure out how it works. And sometimes I'll post chapter progress updates there! More convenient than editing my profile all the time like I used to do.

Anyway sorry for the large gap between updates, finals came around and I got very distracted. But I should be back on track with a better update schedule now!



# lay siege to tear our cities down

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Techno observes the rise and fall of Wilbur's chest, and finds so much irregularity it might as well be the constant.

Well, at the very least, he is sleeping. At some point during the exile Wilbur's insomnia crossed the severity of even Techno's, trudging through his crazed consciousness with a persistence only the truly deranged could channel.

He had been writing in that journal, bound and pale yellow, before falling asleep, the fast scratches of a matted black quill stabbing into the silence between them.

That's good. Or at least, it should be, but Techno knows better than to pry through such a personal matter to confirm.

The last thing Wilbur needs is more breaches of trust.

He supposes he can say the same for himself. There are so many things left undiscussed deep in the ravine with Tommy, simmering below the surface of those dull lantern lights. Of hurts and beliefs and betrayals.

Peer pressure is not, will never be, a valid excuse for why he unleashed the fireworks on Tubbo, permanently disfiguring and disabling him, and Techno has always known this. He had panicked, had felt the eyes of thousands stare into him, had felt that familiar, insurmountable urge for *blood*.

It was just another child, he had reasoned, and he's done so much worse before. The pressure was so *overwhelming*, the way it seeped through his ribs to choke his lungs and form a ball of thorny vines in his throat against Schlatt's demands, a sentence he could not bring himself to fight and ignore.

Well, Techno is not a good person and he has never fancied himself to be one. He hadn't really known Tubbo then, had underestimated how much Tommy cared for him. It is one of two regrets he carries with him from the war.

Tommy, however, Tommy had no reason to be shocked by the withers. After everything - so much emphasizing, so much clearness and communication on Techno's intentions-

But no, Tommy will learn, Tommy *has* learned already. He has severed several leashes and Techno sees, in those flickering, bright eyes, that he has plans to sever more. He's stronger, willing to amass the rubble of his past and build himself up a more armored future. To match, and then overshadow, the once looming and seemingly insurmountable adversaries of his trauma.

Tommy has the potential to be great one day. Techno will give credit where it is due.

But right now, he is still so delicate. A child not born for war, but wrung through it nonetheless.

With how pressing Wilbur and Tommy's situations are, Techno's own can hold out for now. Indefinitely, if he needs it to, if it might threaten the peace and stability of this patchwork family. He's tired of mending wounds. He's tired of fighting wars.

Again, he eyes Wilbur carefully, but despite the tumultuous nights he has never felt him leave, or try anything. Techno's stakeouts have caught nothing either.

The single light of the attic is a tiny lantern Techno has yet to blow out and slide away on a shelf. The light flickers shadows across Wilbur's back, catches streaks of brilliant gold in his soft, wavy hair.

Phil must have untangled and brushed some of it out, painstakingly unwound and rewound all the strands. Restored some form of love and care into Wilbur's life in the ways he knows how. In the ways Wilbur once missed, though then again, what does Techno know of such matters?

He wonders how long it'll take Wilbur to notice.

~\*~

The next day they wake to a sparkling white world and soft, nipping breezes. After breakfast, Phil ushers everyone outside for more building.

The ravine can wait, he thinks, and wonders how long it will take to overcome that hurdle.

Wilbur announces his intention to gather more wood, and Techno promptly announces his intention to go with him. The former barely acknowledges the words, grabbing an axe and whisking himself off, leaving Techno to frown and trail after him with a line of printed snow.

Meanwhile, Phil and Tommy tie up some loose ends.

A priority is a better shelter for their horses. Before, they had been housed in a small cave, a dingy space indented into a rocky outcropping nearby. But over the past few days he and Tommy had been working on connecting a smaller building to the entrance for more room and shelter against the climate.

They finish the final wall today, hammering in the last few planks and Phil fiddling with another, much larger door. The horses are a few paces behind, pawing away the grainy snow to munch on stiff, blue-tinged grass.

"So what did you and Techno talk about down there?" Phil asks as he carefully screws the hinges into place. He's given a humming noise in response.

"Tommy."

"Random shit," Tommy says. "Not about you - well, not much about you, if you were wondering. Told me to be nicer to Wilbur. Something about power and stuff. Vague Techno bullshit."

"Power and stuff," Phil echoes, and he knows he should trust Techno, but the reality is that *none* of them are of particularly sound mind. It's something he frets over, day and night, because he has no idea how to handle any of it and he always feels so *lost* in the face of such problems.

"Told him I want to... gain more control, I guess," Tommy shrugs. "It wasn't that fucking complicated."

Phil takes a step away and swings the door back and forth, feeling the scratchy fluidity of the motions. Good enough, he decides.

"You told that to Techno, and the response wasn't complicated?" he asks, some incredulosity seeping through.

“Well - he was all cryptic and shit like usual but I think I got it. Like, we talked about the discs and me letting them go, about - Techno went on this weird metaphor about leashes and handles and stuff. And then - well, I guess I have to get over Tubbo too. Not forever! Just... for now.”

“I know you still miss him,” Phil says, and Tommy rolls his eyes.

“No shit, Phil. Tubbo was my best friend. He - you remember, he was there for me a lot before we left for the Dream SMP.” There’s a bitter edge to his tone, the voice of longing for what once was.

Phil does remember, but he was not particularly involved in Tommy’s friendships either. Tubbo had been Niki’s brother, though he isn’t quite sure whether he’s adopted or not, showing up with her a few months before Wilbur and Tommy left the house. Tommy’s ramblings about his activities, at that point, were often tuned out by Phil - by them all, after a long day of working on something or another.

It’s just another thing he regrets, focusing so much on personal projects while still hoping to properly take care of three children. Phil has been - still is - so naive in all the ways they can break.

“Did Techno advise you to let go of him too?” Phil asks.

“No,” Tommy shrugs. “I’m not a part of L’Manberg anymore, and I’m not going back to fucking reconnect or whatever, but it doesn’t mean I never want to see him again. We’re - we can figure something out. Eventually.”

“Eventually?”

“Once Wilbur...” Tommy makes a face, and twists his hand around in a vague gesture. “You know. Stops thinking about traitors all the time. And we get our shit together.”

Something in Phil warms against the coldness around him, at that. Tommy’s - Tommy’s learning, alright. The circumstances are less than ideal, but he’s *learning* and though he may not know it now, that is one less leash on him and one more handle in his arsenal.

“That’s the spirit,” Phil says, nodding. Tommy’s cheeks puff up a bit, pale pink against the cold. “Still vague on details about Techno, though. I know he can be a bit much, and I - well, I know what happened with the festival.”

Tommy looks down, and then back up, reaching out to pat his horse’s dusty gray head.

“It’s fine. All fine and shit. Fine as it fucking can be, I guess. Call it a brotherly bonding moment if it helps,” he says. “Don’t worry about it.”

Phil sighs.

“That’s what I thought with this whole L’Manberg business too,” he says. “And look how that turned out.”

Tommy’s eyes widen at that, and there’s a faint crunch as he takes a step forward.

“You - but...”

He’s not a good father, Phil knows, and he’s come to terms with that, but his sons need all the support they can get right now and he *wants* to be better and he’s trying and - it has to be enough, right?



Phil leans closer and sweeps Tommy into a tight hug. There's a muffled "urk!" and some squirming as his wings close around him, but Tommy quickly relaxes into the grip with a contented huff.

"Look, if you really think it's no problem, then tell me, okay?" Phil says. "But I wasn't there for you guys for so long and I don't plan on making that mistake again."

His breath swirls the air above Tommy in hazy pirouettes. He'd forgotten, back then, how fragile children are. How fragile anyone's mind can be, left alone in an unforgiving world. Phil is a creature born to isolation, to the freezing skies and desolate peaks, but his sons are not.

"Oh," Tommy eventually says, and Phil slowly loosens his grip. "Sure. Okay."

Phil gives him a tiny smile, and they get back to work. There's still a house to build.

~\*~

Chopping trees is a monotonous, mindless task, and where Wilbur once detested such work he now finds solace in its vacuity. It's a retreat, a cove of emptiness where he can shield himself behind mirrors and smoke for the inordinate stretches of time he's gone.

In the steady *thunking* of wood, in the spits of flying bark that slice his cheeks and showerings of shriveled leaves that crown his hair, he can detach for as long as his body still has energy left to move, and afterwards.

Techno is none the wiser, so busy he is in pursuit of efficiency, and absorbed in wariness of their wider, wilder surroundings.

Of course, Wilbur is practically nothing now, empty oceans and cracked glass eyes. Nothing of note, or worth paying attention to, so Techno ultimately has the right idea. It's freeing in a way, another tether loosened.

His mind hums in the nothingness, old and listless tunes that will never complete themselves, doomed to waste away in a broken, static memory. Wilbur has long since given up on their resolutions.

The songs in his memories are ones with endings like hanged men, strangled in final moments of gasping, twisting agony, cut off with a sudden, lurching limpness. No grand deaths for those traitors, only wasted, one-note glances. Perhaps that's why the path set is not the path taken. Perhaps he doesn't deserve even that.

His eyes close somewhere along the mist, and his hands are moving, chopping, repeating static and-

*1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and 1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and 1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and 1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and 1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and...*

Eventually, the drifting mist parts in the form of Techno's hands digging into his shoulder. Wilbur lets himself be guided along, content to let the notes hit where they may. They've taken a lower path now, for some reason.

"-help split the logs..."

Wilbur blinks, and Phil is gesturing in front of him, Tommy and Techno nodding. Are they working on the larger house now?

The sun is just past the midway point, Wilbur notes. The sky is clear. Smooth winds and the whistling tweets of songbirds. A brown one with a spotted black underbelly slowly flutters by behind Phil with the faintest sound of beating, shuddering clatters. Silken feathers splayed out at unnatural angles. A broken wing, maybe.

“I can do that,” Wilbur says. “Split the logs.”

“No need-”

“We can handle it-”

Techno coughs, glancing at Phil.

“Why don’t you clear out more snow?” Phil says to Wilbur, and gets a nod back in response.

He blinks, and there’s a shovel in his hands.

As he shovels, he’s aware often enough to catch the nervous, monitoring glances they all constantly throw his way. He knows the fear in their voices and the guarded way they prowls around him, waiting for a simple mishap.

They could get more done if they aren’t like this - that thought surfaces slowly in the haze. They could be happier. Less paranoid with their weak link gone.

Wilbur supposes he has always been the weak link. To everything, really, a fiery tumble of utopian ideals and grandiose speeches, gold flakes on rotten wood, doomed to smash down in blazing disaster.

From the wreckage of that disaster limps forth a pitiful, pathetic creature.

He’s a beacon of coldness now. Spring is coming. He dreads the melt, and welcomes it all the same.

~\*~

“Phil, where are the elytras?” Tommy asks, and Phil looks up from his map. The fireplace light gives his wings waves of glinting shimmers as he stretches them out. Outside the fenced and lit area around the cabin, the forest is crawling with monsters.

“Somewhere in my ender chest,” he says, gathering blankets up around him. Tommy closes his heavy eyelids as well, grasping his pillow in his hands. “Why are you asking?”

“Flying,” Tommy shrugs. “Gliding. Whatever the fuck it’s called. Feel like trying it again.”

“Oh. Sure.” Phil stares at him for a few silent moments before collapsing his map, slowly smoothing every crease and tucking every fold before sliding it into an invisible nook in his ender chest. The lid closes with a *click*. “I think I still have some rockets too. Why the sudden decision?”

*“So get yourself some handles, Tommy.”*

*Explosions. Explosions, and whistling, and cackling, and the blasting rush of air as Tubbo’s scarred body collapses in front of him.*

Tommy takes a deep breath and flops onto his bed. He pulls the blankets up, furs of wavy russet brown. Soft wool tickles his lips as he shifts the pillow beneath his head.

It's warm, the cabin bathed in the heat of the fire. The blankets are soft and his family is close and Tommy feels... safe, or safer than he has in a long, long time. Comforted, maybe.

"I wanna taste some freedom, you know?" he says with a grin, and Phil makes a hum of acknowledgement.

Tommy snorts at that, and allows the darkness of sleep to softly carry him off.

## Chapter End Notes

Not particularly satisfied with how this one went but I have a feeling I'd be poking at it forever if I let myself so uhh here have a chapter. As always, feedback of any kind is appreciated!

# **those who would give up essential liberty, to purchase a little temporary safety, deserve neither**

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Techno,” Tommy says. “I found some shit.”

“Gonna have to be more specific, Tommy,” Techno says, but Tommy hears him step closer anyway, boots clicking softly across cracked stone. His own shadow folds smaller and smaller into itself as he takes a step to the side.

Tommy points at a crack between the walls as Techno reaches him. The ravine is mostly lit up now, lanterns and torch holders placed around the corners, redstone lamps from the few bits of the powder they have found so far. (Phil had said something about it forming more frequently at lower levels, though Tommy had been too busy daydreaming about bees to remember for sure).

Everlasting light sources are a convenience Tommy has forgotten the utility of, back during his time in the Dream SMP. Coal lasts a while, of course, but when possible torches and lanterns hold glowstone and not fire.

The Nether, however, is not a place any of them want to breach quite yet.

The crack itself is pitch dark, a gash between an arching wall of the ravine, and just barely large enough for Tommy to slip through some effort. The telltale sound of flowing water trickles from the space.

“So that’s the water source Phil mentioned,” Techno says, and at that moment a groan echoes from the space as well.

Tommy wrinkles his nose again in disgust. Zombies, always appearing in the most inopportune moments possible.

He readies his sword, only for Techno to catch his wrist. Tommy tries not to flinch, and manages an internal half-hearted cheer when he just barely manages to keep his movement steady.

“What are you doing?” Techno asks. Tommy frowns.

“Going in to light up the place?” he says. “What, are we supposed to just give up on a water source?”

“Let me go first,” Techno says.

Tommy’s frown deepens. He glances from Techno, to the crack, and back again, and yeah, there is *no* fucking way his 7 foot brother with a thick blue cape is fitting through that space.

Techno blinks at him, head tilting in that peculiar way of his when Tommy doesn’t move.

“Is there a problem?” he asks, as though he’s asking of the weather.

“You’re fitting through that?” Tommy asks. “Since when did you get the ability to magically shrink yourself?”

“What - you think I’m squeezing through that?” Techno laughs, low and amused, and seems to laugh harder at Tommy’s confused expression.

“Oh, shut up!” Tommy huffs, and pushes him again. “Just tell me already! I’m missing some stupid shit, aren’t I?”

He waits for that familiar bile of resentment to pool up, but Techno smiles down at him in a way that’s intrigued and *patient* and Tommy’s surprised to find nothing but that same constant warmth burning inside of him.

Well, something to contemplate another time.

He really has been spending too much time around Techno.

“Watch and learn, Tommy,” Techno says, and swings out his pickaxe.

Tommy has a frozen moment to think *oh, shit*, before the netherite tip smashes through the top of the crack and lengthens it by at least half a foot. Techno takes a moment to flash grinning teeth at him before continuing his onslaught.

Eventually, there’s a gap between the walls that’s twice as big as it used to be and Techno’s sword is flashing. With a smooth arc it sails across the air, impales the incoming zombie right through the head, *and comes out the other side* with an echoing clatter that rings a bit too long in Tommy’s ears.

They both stand there for a minute, taking in the darkness. Tommy’s lantern barely illuminates the zombie’s rotting feet, twisted green skin and the glint of jutting bone.

“Show off,” Tommy eventually says, and Techno snorts.

“Technoblade never dies.”

“I wanna try that next time.”

Techno raises an eyebrow and nods. They turn back to the space.

As Techno moves to retrieve his sword, light pours into the darkness, and their suspicions are confirmed.

It’s a tiny cavern, a single stream taking up most of the space. The zombie’s head just barely dips into the waters and Tommy kicks it away with a wince.

“So. Here it is,” Tommy says.

“Indeed,” Techno responds. He kneels down at the cold, rocky edge, lined with spots of moss and algae, and cups his hands into the stream.

“Are you - why are you drinking the water?” Tommy asks.

Techno gives him a look of mild disbelief at the question and gulps the liquid down. Shakes darting droplets from his hands.

“To test if it’s drinkable, duh,” he says. “Can’t always tell by taste, but sometimes there are warning signs.”

“That’s like testing if something is poisoned by eating it.” Tommy says. Techno shrugs.

“Most things don’t poison me, and if you haven’t noticed I don’t ever really get sick,” he says.  
“Something about piglins and their evolved diets.”

Tommy knows to trust Techno on such matters, but still, he couldn’t deny the flutter of panic that had reared itself when Techno mentioned poison. He wonders if Techno is even aware of such emotions,

“So, is it poisoned?” Tommy asks.

“Didn’t notice anything off. It’s like really cold water. Tastes like stone.”

“What the fuck does that mean, tastes like stone?” Tommy rolls his eyes.

“If I don’t drop dead anytime soon, then maybe you’ll find out,” Techno says. He looks around, and places a lantern on a nearby rock before taking out and lighting another one. “Doesn’t look like there’s much else in this place.”

Tommy glances between the two ends of the cavern where the water runs from and to unknown destinations, blocked from view by clifflike edges.

“That’s pretty much the whole ravine explored, isn’t it?” he says.

“Yep,” Techno says. “Could probably get some strip mines going, but we have more than enough exposed iron and coal for now, and that’s the important bit. Should probably build some furnaces soon too.”

Tommy nods, and looks down at the zombie. He feels oddly accomplished, for some reason.

“We could just toss it in the stream,” Techno says. “Hack it apart if you want to make sure it doesn’t clog anything.”

“You just *drank* from it-”

“All sorts of disgusting things end up in rivers, Tommy,” Techno shrugs. “Including plenty of dead bodies. That’s why you should drink from the upstream when you can, and zombie flesh isn’t even that bad of a food source. Pretty sure humans have evolved to tolerate it.”

“Eat rotten flesh? No thanks,” Tommy says, but eventually they agree that they can’t have a zombie rotting here. Techno cuts all its limbs and Tommy kicks its head clean off, and they watch as pieces get swept away and disappear beneath the stone.

“Well, time to see what Phil’s cooked up for lunch,” Techno says.

“You’re disgusting,” Tommy says, and grins up at him. He can definitely do with some fresh air.

~\*~

After lunch, they all agree to take a break. Techno pulls out his journal and begins writing, while Wilbur hums something on a chair next to him.

“Phil,” Tommy says. “Elytras and shit, remember?”

Phil hesitates, face drawn for the tiniest second before moving to unlatch the ender chest. The shimmering wings and rockets are quickly handed over.

“You’re sure about this, right?” he asks. “I know - I should have thought more before having us all fly to the continent. You don’t have to feel pressured to deal with your fears.”

“Someone’s fucking gotta,” Tommy says, and tries not to look at Wilbur. He won’t be like Wilbur right now, he *can’t*. None of them can afford any more stress and Tommy’s determined to not mess it up for once in his life.

“Well, we can go out and try some maneuvers right now,” Phil says. He nudges Techno, who raises his head from his book.

“Yeah?” he asks.

“Me and Tommy are going outside to mess with the elytra a bit,” Phil says. “Keep an eye on Wilbur, okay?”

“Tommy and I,” Techno mutters, yawning softly - and then clarity blinks into his eyes and he nods at the request.

“Oh, sure.”

They all glance at Wilbur, now staring into the wall with his usual blankness. Tommy suppresses another bout of annoyance (*and maybe sorrow*) and stands up.

“Let’s go,” he says, and Phil nods with a jerky motion. They all pretend not to see the way he embraces Wilbur just a bit too tightly before opening the door.

~\*~

“You were mainly just catching wind currents and using a rocket when you couldn’t,” Phil explains as Tommy spits out a crunchy, bitter leaf. “But there’s a lot of different turns and maneuvers you can do that’ll make you much harder to catch if you were, say, being chased.”

“My awesomeness would scare them away before any of that happens,” Tommy snorts. “Besides, who’s chasing me into the fucking sky?”

Phil stifles a laugh, and pats his shoulder.

“Maybe, but just in case,” he says. “Either way, it’s some cool shit. Try again.”

Tommy grins and readjusts his position before launching himself off the tree branch.

The world spirals around him. He feels the wings fan out, shoulders pulling taut and every arm muscle straining. This time, he hones in on the whips of brown below. One barely slaps his side and he twists with about as much grace as a flailing duckling, trying to not hit anything. Everything blurs into smears of colors and roaring winds.

But he manages not to tangle himself on another branch immediately, wincing as something slices his cheek and he’s falling faster and faster and-

“Spread them further! Glide!”

Phil's voice cuts through the haze, there's a flash of black in the corner of his vision and Tommy somehow has the mind to comply, flattening his body and stretching his shoulders - and then he's slowing down and the world comes into focus.

Tommy's hair flattens and he tries not to shiver against the biting gales that seem to trace every part of him. A leaf barely brushes his right eye. The whispering forest comes alive in its warping stillness as he glides through its seas of branches and races towards the flecks of pale skyline, the thrill of it all taking his breath away.

He's picking up speed again, he realizes, and he angles down to avoid another branch and yelps as a rush of russet brown meets his eyes. His feet slam into a shower of crackling leaves and snow as he collapses into the earth.

"Tommy!" Phil calls from somewhere behind him. "You okay?"

"Yeah!" Tommy yells back, taking a few deep breaths. "I'm great! That was fucking amazing!"

A familiar whoosh settles beside him as Phil lands and tucks his wings closed.

"It's an experience, alright," he chuckles. "Nowhere near as much control as actual wings, but being in the air feels like... well, freedom."

"Freedom, fuck yeah!" Tommy jumps up and screams the words through the edges of the forest, and where a few paces over the rocky barriers of their crater-like area drops sheer, scaled cliffs. His lungs are heaving with air cold and sharp and he hasn't felt so *alive* in such a long while and it's *fucking incredible*.

They stand there for a few more moments, taking in their snow swathed world, rugged and swaying and, for the first time in Tommy's eyes, beautiful.

Eventually, he shakes the leaves out of his hair. A crunch echoes the forest as he takes a step forward, eyes focused on the spots of blue that peek behind the treeline. The end of the woods, where the rocks meet the sky and the winds blow in racing streams around the clouds.

He recalls again the rush of adrenaline, the exhilaration of everything in the world laid out around him and how he moves through it all without resistance, as though he was swimming through his most powerful dreams and nothing, *no one* could catch him, could drag him away and back into the darkness.

He is *definitely* doing this again.

~\*~

"We should make it easier to get down here," Techno says. "Mine out some stairs."

Wilbur merely nods, and holds out a hand.

Techno hesitates, glancing at his second pickaxe. But his reaction times are good enough, and Wilbur's hair shines eerily in the lantern light, and surely that has to be enough?

He really is hopeless with all this, Techno thinks with an internal sigh. He slowly hands the pickaxe forward, and Wilbur takes it at the same crawling pace.

They get to work, the ravine quickly filling with the distinctly sharp chink of netherite on stone.



Wilbur seems content to mine and move the materials, loosening gravel and using a shovel to push it against the opposite ravine walls. Techno works by his side, and whereas he would normally bask in the quiet, the shadows of Wilbur's looming specter chills them further with each moment of silence.

*For Phil*, he finally reminds himself. *For Tommy. For Wilbur.*

"How are you doing?" he asks, and Wilbur doesn't respond. Techno is used to such. Even back in Pogtopia, he was used to such a response.

He places a hand on Wilbur's shoulder and shakes. It's a cue that's gotten less effective as time drags by, but Techno's too nervous of consequences to try anything new. Especially right now, with only the two of them.

"How are you doing?" he asks again, and Wilbur blinks at him with a dusty shovel and half-parted lips.

"Fine," Wilbur finally says, looking down.

"Look at me, Wilbur," Techno says, trawling through his memories to grasp Phil's example. "Look at me, and tell me how you're doing."

"...not fine," is the next response.

"And?"

"I - I don't know."

Techno takes a deep breath. He feels like throwing his pickaxe into the ground and stalking off to anywhere else. Anywhere but here, where he's forced to confront his worst mistakes and most terrifying nightmares come true.

Where the light is dim and the shadows always concealing, where there is nothing between him and the truth he's so afraid of and every avenue of escape is towered by cold, unforgiving stone. He's braved Tommy, but he is not sure he can brave Wilbur. Not like this. Nothing like this, cold as the void and just as repellingly possessive.

"Please," Techno whispers, and Wilbur closes his eyes. "You can't hide from everything forever."

"What else is there to do?" Wilbur asks, voice like dripping acid. Techno winces.

"Tommy-"

"I know what I did to Tommy," Wilbur says. "And yet he's forced to live with me. He has to pretend I'm still his brother. What kind of justice is that?"

"You *are* still his brother," Techno snaps. A surge of thundering fury floods his veins, but it subsides away just as quickly at Wilbur's impassive stare.

He doesn't know what to do. Techno has to face this reality, the reality he's been living in for the past month or so. He doesn't know what to do but he has to do *something*. It's as simple as that, and Techno hates it. Hates the way he clams up and down and sideways, irregular patterns spiking with every interaction.

He takes a step forward and grabs Wilbur's shoulders, jerking his attempt at turning away to a halt.

“You have to face that responsibility, Wilbur.”

“Tommy shouldn’t have to,” Wilbur says back.

“You’re being evasive.” Techno struggles to keep the frustration out of his tone. He can’t lose control, not here. Anywhere but here, with the paper thin glass that is Wilbur’s mental state.

“I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

There it is again. It’s Wilbur’s favorite line now, Techno thinks, keeping the resentment from his expression. At least that, he can do - mold his face into a mask of indifference, one as hard and unrevealing as Dream’s.

Who knows if it still works, though, around Wilbur. So much has changed and he understands so very little of it. Techno is just beginning to realize the scope.

“You - you can’t hide from this forever, Wilbur,” he manages.

Wilbur hefts his pickaxe and turns back towards the slanted incline that is the entrance to the ravine.

“I want to get this staircase done soon,” he says, and starts mining again.

It’s cold. Techno thinks of bruises and betrayals, the crackle of fireworks and tingle of embracing shadows, nights of silence and screaming where he has only ever contributed to the cause.

It is Phil, who dragged him away. Tommy, who Wilbur so desperately loved and scorned with that love, and who has to rebuild it again. Techno as well, but Techno is forever the mismeasured piece. Wilbur was light and music, can still be, but Techno has and will always be a blade.

Why does everything he touches fall to bloody, shattered fragments?

He continues to work next to Wilbur in silence, and doesn’t try to bring the subject of apology up again.

~\*~

Perhaps it’s his destiny to always end everything with a depression that permeates the souls and specters around him. Misery that continues to refold itself long after the originator’s death, a self-replicating machine of internal destruction.

He knows it in Techno’s haunched, defeated shoulders, Phil’s desperate pleas and Tommy’s shadowed yells in the middle of the night.

Isn’t that just nice?

Might as well take out as much fuel as he can, as soon as he can, but Wilbur is nothing if not a coward and he knows this to be the greatest truth of his life and existence thereafter.

Techno is alert, but Wilbur is who knows him best. It’s a sad thought, for his brother, but it’s Phil afterwards and he’s beginning to think that Phil may have the better claim anyways now. And to think he was once so proud of it all.

Either way, his steps are placed just so around the blankets and no one makes a sound.

The moonlight is softer, shaded with a soundless gaze that does not cast judgement on the beneath, so still and silent in the dead of white winter. The owls are softer too, impossible wingbeats and quick flashes of death. The occasional harmony of a wolf pack howls across the mountains, a family on the chase for food and freedom.

*Good for them*, Wilbur thinks.

The forest edge comes into view, a grayscale that tints darker the more he unfocuses. Beyond him is a sheer drop, cliffs and trees and something like a river, glinting surfaces that snake across the valleys.

It's cold, out here. It's peaceful, out here. All his problems are behind him and the world is spread before him. It's these moments where he feels freer than he ever has been. His phantom wings begging to stretch beneath the ocean and he doesn't care to remind them that they were clipped and ripped off in scragged, bloodstained warfare a long time ago, in explosions and swords for the weak and foolish.

His hair is cold and he knows, but he doesn't dare to care. A storm is brewing in the ocean. To weather it is to sink, to acknowledge it is to drown islands. The world will spin in gray, like it does every night in his nightmares and on every walk along the moonlight's edge.

The moon is brighter. Techno will wake up soon. Such is the pattern of the seemingly unpredictable.

The night is still and the grayscale calls, and Wilbur wonders. He doesn't answer, however, not tonight, because he is forever the coward and nothing can change it now.

He turns and glides back across the white. He's used to - well, they're all used to the cold now, so ironic is this awareness. He tucks a strand of glowing hair back and away, where it belongs.

The edge of the world, they say of the cliffs, of the boundless skyline. It calls and he knows he will answer again. After all, Wilbur is an addict and the drug is now freedom.

## Chapter End Notes

Feedback welcome, as always! What did you think? I try to reply to every one with my thoughts, and I love reading feedback on how I handled issues and what sticks with readers. The plot is slowing down some to explore the character dynamics and relationships more, and hopefully it doesn't feel too draggy?

And careful, Wilbur and Tommy. Don't let the Americans infect you guys lol.

# fly fast, fly hard

## Chapter Notes

[discord](#) to get pings for updates/discuss stuff!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

### *Entry 17*

*Went down to the cliffs again tonight. It wasn't snowing this time. Pity.*

*I think I would look good covered in snow.*

*Tommy used to love making snowmen when he was younger. Not even snowmen - strange, misshapen creatures. Monstrosities with antlers of twisted silver branches and obsidian flakes for too many eyes. He loved pretending they were real, hugging them like they were a source of comfort.*

*I remember being jealous. Wasn't I a good source of comfort? Wasn't I a good brother to talk to? Why did he run to pantomimes of storytime horrors instead?*

*Why did he more often run to Techno instead?*

*The implications of this train of thought are not lost on me.*

*I was never a good brother, was I? All plagues start somewhere. Mine had always been festering, pushed deep down by bright smiles and self denial.*

*Schlatt. He's a little rat, indeed. Dream too. The whole of L'Manberg's ideals, corrupted from the beginning.*

*I know I'm the root of that plague. The other traitors spread it everywhere, but it still started with me. L'Manberg was never going to work out, was it?*

*Tubbo was made president just before I blew it up. Now he's trying to rebuild it. Why would anyone bother to rebuild that wreck? My wreck?*

*My symphonies are never finished. I know why now. I hate it, but at least I know. It'll all work out in the end, anyway. It's only fitting.*

*I think I would look good covered in snow. Snowbur.*

*Maybe then, I'd be a better brother.*

~\*~

There's a small mountain of bricks before him. They're baked a dark earthy brown in the afternoon sun, and as Tommy takes one in his hand, he sees waves of grainy texture and the occasional line of

pale grass.

“How’s the floor going?” Phil asks, swooping over to him.

“Nearly done,” Tommy says, and grins when Phil’s expression lights up. “I’m just such a great fucking builder, huh?”

“You definitely have the potential,” Phil agrees. He pauses, and lowers his shoulders. “How’s Wilbur?”

“A coward, like usual,” Tommy says. He glances behind his shoulder, and sure enough, there his brother is in all his hunched and muted glory. His mood promptly dampens.

“Promise I haven’t said that to his face again though,” he mutters.

“That’s - good.”

“Sure, sure.” Tommy doesn’t quite feel like diving into that shitfire of a topic right now, so he clears his throat and points at the pile of bricks. Lets his eyes wander over Phil’s clay-caked hands.

“So,” he says. “Do we have enough?”

“For a fireplace that’s less likely to burn the house down, yeah,” Phil says, “And to layer the outside perimeter. We should have enough wood cut for the frame already.”

“This forest will be a fucking wasteland by the time we’re done with it,” Tommy comments, and Phil laughs.

“That’s not a problem,” he says. “Techno actually did some calculations with me last night, and even by exaggerated estimates we’ll barely make a noticeable dent. A second floor shouldn’t be a problem either, when we get there.”

*When we get there.* Tommy can’t help the faint smile that traces his lips at the idea. That this is home, that they will live here together for the foreseeable future. It’s becoming more of an established reality in his mind, with every new sash of gravel laid and batch of clay smoothed over for the floor of the soon to be main house.

“Are we using those bricks right now?” Tommy asks. He kicks at a drift of snow next to them, particles glittering as they arc back into the sea of white that surrounds them.

Phil raises an eyebrow.

It’s snowed multiple times since they arrived a month ago, and now it seems they’re swarmed with blizzards more often than not. It’s cut down productivity by a more than annoying margin, though with flaming torches and a bit of careful maneuvering Techno and Phil have since managed to do most of the “shoveling” work when needed.

“For the foundation, then,” Tommy says, taking the hint. “You sure the ground’s stable enough?”

Phil hides a grin behind his wings. He’s done it a few times now in response to various things Tommy’s said, like some inside joke only he’s privy to.

Fucking weird, but Tommy has other things to worry about. He’s tired of asking after everything.

*Maybe later*, he tells himself.

"I checked the parts we completed last night, and it's good enough," Phil shrugs. "We're not building a giant stone mansion."

"Could you two stop talking for a moment and help us get this done?" Techno calls to them from the newly smoothed foundations. "We don't - well, we do have all day, but I'd rather finish sooner than later."

Tommy huffs a plume of curling white mist and makes his way over.

The frame is surprisingly easy to set up, though a time consuming pain. Tommy drags and pushes beams into place wherever Techno and Phil directs him to, and moves on as they get stuck with the work of double and triple checking their calculations to ensure everything's as exact as it can be before nailing.

He hears vague discussions of alignments and structure and eventual replacement (which better not come too soon - it takes so much fucking effort for all of this and it would be just their luck to have something stupid like termites or mold or weird bendy wood physics to destroy everything), and Phil stretches out his roll of measuring tape so often Tommy has half a mind to rip it apart before he trips and hits his head on something sharp.

Overall, though, it's not terrible. Wilbur doesn't talk much, but that's to be expected like usual.

Tommy's not sure which he prefers at this point.

They work in relative silence as the cold punctuates his lungs and his muscles heave more and more, straining beneath the weight of grumbling timbers. Even back during Pogtopia, Tommy never had to do all that much physical labor. He's starting to realize being a good fighter doesn't translate into strength in other areas.

*Took you long enough to figure that out*, he thinks with a tint of wryness. *Tommy Innit, self aware. What illegality is this?*

They stop about two hours before the sun sets, when Phil declares he's going to make dinner and Tommy turns to wash his hands in the nearby stream.

"Maybe a wedge piece here?" Techno's voice slides into softness as Tommy continues walking, and he snorts as the last thing he hears is Phil reminding him to stop working and go inside.

He has to stop and stomp at hard, solid sheets of ice to access the water beneath. It's cold as expected but still a brief shock. Refreshing all the same, though. He watches a few silver flashes dart down the currents and wonders how any creature survives the frigid temperatures.

A strange paradox lies within the waters, not that he's particularly invested in deriving the secrets of the universe from it. That's Techno's hobby.

With a quiet huff, Tommy turns and heads back to their cabin.

~\*~

"Phil," Tommy says. "I wanna try the elytra alone this time."

Phil blinks. "Why?"

Techno glances between them, Wilbur blankly poking at his food beside him. There's something brewing beneath the surface here again, he can sense in that nebulous space of mind where thoughts of his family dominate.

"Just - because," Tommy says. "You can't hold my wings forever - or whatever weird shit Techno would call it."

"I think it's something like 'shove out the nest'," Techno supplies. He frowns, tapping the table in a gliss of fingers. "I don't remember exactly."

"Yeah, that," Tommy says.

"Are you sure?" Phil's expression tenses, in the same way he does when watching Wilbur for any determinate amount of time. Techno straightens up, but remains silent.

"I'll be fine," Tommy says. "Just - I mean, I'm not Wilbur. I'm the pinnacle of indestructibility."

"Then it doesn't mean what you think it means," Techno says.

"Yes it does," Tommy shoots back. Phil sighs.

"I - okay," he cuts in. "Promise me you'll be back at least half an hour before nightfall."

"Yeah, yeah."

Techno glances at Wilbur, whose eyes are half lidded and avoiding everyone's gaze.

...well. Sure.

~\*~

"How are you doing?" Phil asks, plopping down next to Techno on the bed.

They should try for some couches soon, he thinks. They definitely have enough furs for it.

"Fine," Techno says back, and Phil wants to latch onto those words so much, but Tommy has just ran off with the elytra and an insistence on going about it alone, despite how much Phil wants to protest.

*He's not Wilbur*, he reminds himself.

*Wilbur's not himself either. They're both your responsibility. You made it this way.*

It'll be fine. It has to be. He knows where Tommy is, after all. And Tommy's never been one to appreciate constant guarding.

Just a small flying practice. Alone.

Shoving out the nest indeed. It happened too quickly and now not quickly enough, not that Phil ever learned how any of it works.

"Then why are you sharpening your sword?" he elects to ask Techno, grasping at the obvious exit from this spiral.

"It was getting dull."

Good to know his humor remains dry as ever.

Phil fixes him with a too familiar stare.

The moment crawls by. He can count every second with ease.

Techno sighs. He leans back, like he always does eventually.

“Just in case, you know?” he says, waving a hand at everything around them. The silence. The safety. The - well, not quite *peace*, but they’re getting there. Phil hopes. “We don’t want to get caught by surprise.”

Another pang in his chest, but at least this time Phil knows the specifics.

“You want to train a bit, then?” Phil asks. “Not with that sword, of course, I don’t want any injuries. But we can make some wooden tools real quick.”

Techno is silent for another moment, undoubtedly considering the implications of the request. They both glance up, where Wilbur is in the loft above.

Phil meets his eyes again, a plea. For a moment of calm. Just a moment.

“Sure,” Techno says finally. “A little spar.”

~\*~

“You’re rusty,” Techno says, jabbing the rounded end of his makeshift spear at Phil’s heart.

Phil steps back with a raised hand and a wry smile as he returns his sword into a defending position. “I’m aware. Again?”

“I’ll try to go a little easier on you,” Techno says.

“I wasn’t aware I’m the one being trained.”

“We all need training, Phil.”

“And what does that really mean to you?”

Techno catches his eyes again, red reflecting the crown of sunlight that sets in rays behind Phil’s glossy wings.

“You know,” he says, and lunges forward. Phil twists to the side and glances the attack off with his spear. A harsh, sharp clack jolts his body through the weight of the force and he thrusts his wings forward for balance.

To his surprise, Techno stumbles back with the force of the resulting wind, pink hair loose like streaming ribbons. A light stance does have its downside, as does soft snow.

Techno raises his arm, and Phil’s eyes widen. He throws himself left-

Too late, as the spear cuts through the air and knocks into his stomach. Phil lurches back, coughing as the offending weapon falls into the snow with a soft puff.



“It didn’t hit my heart, so I’m still alive,” he grins with a wince. Techno flicks out a dagger from somewhere among the many folds of his coat and mimes another throwing motion.

Phil rolls his eyes. Typical Techno, but these are the strategies which has won him countless battles and wars. Besides, he himself fights dirty all the time as well. Determination with practicality.

His thoughts turn to Wilbur and Tommy, as they are always prone to do so now. Involuntarily, his shoulders slump.

“What is it?” Techno straightens and ploughs over, white dusting over his dark blue pants. “Did I throw it too hard?”

Phil gives a reassuring smile to wave away the concern, shaking his head.

“No, just - thinking. It’s been a while since it’s just been us, you know?” he says, glancing behind his shoulder. The sun is half visible behind rolling peaks of stone, mountains capped of shining white and streaked with shades of blue.

“For good reason,” Techno says. “How do you think we’re doing?”

Phil turns and takes a seat on the snow. There's enough layers on him that the cold is no bother, and he faces the sunset as the mountain they’ve made their home on bare their cliffs before him, slow declines and sharp drops and everything in between.

“Not good enough,” he says.

“Same.”

“This - this shouldn’t be your problem, Techno.” Phil frowns, but even as the words leave him he knows that is no argument.

“You know me better than this, Phil.”

“I do.”

“...so how's our defenses going?”

“Defenses?”

“You know.” Techno steps over and sits down next to him. “In case we get attacked. Or become endangered in some way.”

“You make it sound like we’re a dying species or something,” Phil chuckles.

“Comprehension stirs within thy vernacular proficiency.”

“No, it doesn’t!”

Techno smirks as he leans back to dodge a shove.

“Case in point,” he says. Then he pauses, and turns back to him. “But really, how are our defenses? What safeguards do we have?”

“The fences? They do pretty good with the monsters, and most of those shambling things don’t move well in the snow anyway,” Phil says. “Plus, frozen ground keeps them buried. Um, your wire traps are

still working. No spiders tapping outside the door so far.”

“But what *else*,” Techno presses, and Phil searches in his eyes.

“You have a totem, don’t you?” he asks. Techno nods, tapping the area just below his neck, covered by a light blue sweater. “I know I gave Tommy one sometime, and I always have one on myself. Wilbur - Wilbur didn’t want his and I figured he might just throw it away if I insist he keep it on him.”

Techno is still for a moment, before nodding slowly. Phil decides not to push the matter.

He understands, after all.

“We don’t have enough of anything to get a full beacon going,” Techno finally says. “But once we mine down and hit some lava we can at least make one.”

“And a Nether portal too, for potions,” Phil says. “You haven’t used any, have you?”

“A few drops here and there for Tommy’s cuts,” Techno says. “Sometimes for Wilbur’s too, when he’s not careful enough. Otherwise, no.”

“Should be fine until then,” Phil decides. “Focus on a solid shelter first. Though, we do need glass.”

“Later. When we get the obsidian.”

“Glass is useful for other things,” Phil hums. Techno huffs in annoyance, though his expression remains light.

“We’ll visit the village when we’re more established,” he says. “Who knows what they’ll be like.”

“Money may not solve everything, but it sure solves a lot,” Phil says, somewhat bemused, though another twinge of anxiety courses through him like it always does. “We’ll be fine.”

And if not, they have other methods.

The sky is dark now, a gradient of dull reds and watercolor purple. Chill frosts around his wingtips.

“There’s something else on your mind, isn’t there?” Techno asks. “Your expression’s usually not this lost. Or am I projecting fantasies again?”

Phil shakes his head.

“Can’t stop thinking about Wilbur,” he says. “And Tommy. Feels like forever since it’s been just the two of us and yet - well, this is familiar. I don’t know what to do with anything else.”

“That makes two of us,” Techno replies. They turn to the sunset together. “You know I’m not exactly a paragon of emotional assistance.”

They fall into another silence. It’s a comfortable one, if festering with unspoken truths that wait to breach their dam of fear. And fear can only hold back so much. Phil would rather it break sooner than later, seeing the consequences of his late arrivals.

“Sorry I haven’t spent that much time with you lately,” he says eventually. “Alone, that is, with conversations. It’s - well, all Tommy and Wilbur. And you have to just deal with everything as well.”

“I’m accustomed to war,” Techno hums. “Also - not suicidal, and not traumatized. You should keep that focus where you have it.”

“I wouldn’t say you’re devoid of trauma,” Phil says, and thick crimson flashes among his memories. Sleepless nights and paranoia like spiderwebs in long abandoned cellars, awaiting the ever unsuspecting prey.

“I am,” Techno frowns, and there’s a surety to his tone that makes Phil’s heart squeeze too tightly again.

“Techno, this whole thing with the Blood God and violence isn’t exactly what I’d call a healthy mental state.” Phil traces the edge of a feather. “You can’t always declare your purpose to revolve around it. You’re so much more than that.”

“I’m fine,” Techno repeats. There’s no getting to him when he’s like this, Phil knows from experience, the mindset of a man dead set on believing what they wish. Besides, Techno always did wrap things up with other distractions.

“Just promise me you’ll try to sleep more,” he settles on for now.

“And you promise you’ll stay focused on Tommy and Wil?”

“...yeah,” Phil says. It’s a valid point, after all, especially with now much both of his other sons seem to be straining. “I promise.”

He feels Techno relax against him, the waves of fur trim sinking the tiniest bit against his shoulder.

“Alright,” Techno says. A tiny reassurance of their situation, but one nonetheless. “Alright.”

Phil eases out his wings and wraps one around Techno’s shoulders. It’s a familiar action.

*Not familiar enough*, he reminds himself.

Hopefully, they can change that.

~\*~

Ever since he requested the elytras and glided through the forest, Phil has walked and then flown alongside him with guiding wings and sharp eyes that never seems to miss a single mistake. It’s been two weeks.

This time, however, Tommy slings on his elytra, presses a bunch of rockets against his chest, and runs past it all.

He feels the wings rising as they cut through the air’s stillness, giving every step a lifting bounce. And he can stop here, climb a tree, practice in the forest - but Tommy has been doing that the past few times he’s been here, Phil always nearby, watchful and with words of advice.

He’s finally taking his first few dives alone.

Phil calls out a final reminder of caution, some lilting tone that gives Tommy a brief moment of pause. But he brushes the doubt aside quickly and spares a wave back before the forest envelopes him.

Eventually, inevitably, he's at the cliffs again.

And for the first time, he has fireworks. He clips most of them to the holsters around his belt, leaving two of the thin, spiraling red containers gripped tightly in his right hand.

They are a powerful weapon, Tommy can't deny it. He's seen firsthand what they can do.

*Terrified screaming. A trample of people clawing at exits with the desperation of savaged animals. A sickening swath charred skin and tangled limbs, motionless and smoking in the midday sun.*

*More ear-splitting shrieks and screeches and thundering bangs that feels as though they're exploding Tommy's heart.*

*And Tubbo. Always, Tubbo, with a face split raw open and eyes of smoking tears. Techno's crazed laughter dangling above them as the pearl lands and Tommy throws out a punch and tries not to scream when the pointed, spiraling red stabs closer-*

No, he shouldn't linger on that, he doesn't want more nightmares and doubts and - Tommy takes a deep, shuddering breath and closes his eyes.

Fireworks. Beyond just for killing, they're also essential for sustained flight with an elytra, especially in places without sustained air currents.

*Killing and escaping.*

Such a useful tool.

It's this fact that leads him to the cliffs, and the world that yawns beyond him.

Tommy feels another thrill down his spine.

The past few times he's only jumped off branches, practicing tighter turns and more graceful maneuvers. Phil would have a heart attack if he realizes what Tommy plans to do today, especially with the addition of the rockets.

But Tommy's made it this far now. He doesn't need Phil hovering over his shoulder, well intentioned as the actions might be. He doesn't need anyone else filling Phil's place, either.

Tommy's managed fine before and he'll continue to manage himself fine afterwards.

This is more than just a taste of freedom, this is a taste of *independence*. Fuck leashes.

This is *his* moment.

Tommy closes his eyes, takes a deep breath, and leaps for the clouds.

## Chapter End Notes

Comments, kudos, ect always appreciated! I adore feed back (though of course I understand a lot of people aren't comfortable or don't want to engage in that).

I got tons of great applications for a beta reader position after last chapter, way more than expected. I've actually given a few people preview and input access, and those that have agreed to be credited so far are sweet\_magnolias, MackMack2527, 7CxRhye, and Vanree (ao3) as well as emergencyjoyride (tumblr).

(i reply to comments live! [twitch](#)

[tumblr](#) and [twitter](#) for questions and art!)

# plunge a hand through the clouds and watch them weep

## Chapter Notes

[discord](#) to get pings for updates/discuss stuff!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*Tommy is flying.*

*The world pivots on the path he soars through, spinning like a toy box made just for him.*

*And he treats the box with wariness. He can be cautious.*

*The world does not make itself for anyone, after all. Tommy's been through enough to know.*

*He's heard the stories. Techno called him Theseus.*

*And Tommy told that legend, not today. All the others can go fuck themselves as well.*

*He glides down, and the world's spinning slows to a halt. The mountains spear through clouds beyond the cliffs he lands on, just as he left them.*

*Tommy grins and his elytra folds away.*

*The forest is familiar by now. Before long, the cabin is before him, every log and layer expected.*

*He pushes down the feeling of something cold plucking at his heartstrings, and pushes his way through the door.*

~\*~

"Hello, Tommy," Phil says as Tommy clambers over to the table, still picking at the corners of his eyes. "Good morning."

He looks well rested, more than usual. Perhaps Phil shouldn't worry too much after all, with him - Tommy's growing more steadfast by the day.

*Stay alert*, he reminds himself. *Stay focused*.

On what exactly, though?

"Yeah, great morning," Tommy yawns. He takes a seat. Phil sets a plate of roasted nuts and fish in front of him, and turns to Techno.

"So as I was saying, probably another day or two until we can move beds in," Techno says. "Got the boards cut for the floor yesterday, so today we'll set them."

"The roof is watertight," Phil adds. "And I finally got the door done. We just have to reinforce the walls."

“And build the ones inside.”

“There’s no rush for that, though,” Phil murmurs. He wonders how long it’ll take for them to get bored of this place, with all their restless natures. Techno would enjoy the peace for a while, but Phil’s still painfully aware of the gaps in his understanding of Tommy’s motivations. And Wilbur...

Wilbur shifts, next to him, food barely eaten. Phil curls a wing around his thin shoulders and shakes him gently with a rustle.

Tommy finally looks up from his breakfast.

“And then what?” he asks, mouth still full. “We’re not sitting around here forever, are we?”

“Swallow first, Tommy. You sound like a dying snail.” Techno lets out a yawn, stretching his arms back behind him. “But I agree, that’s a rather dull experience.”

“Another month or two and it should be warm enough to begin planting,” Phil hums. “Afterwards... well, however long we feel like living here, we will. I have plenty of seeds in storage.”

“Just how much *do* you have?” Tommy asks, eyes suddenly scrutinizing. “Feels like everything we’d ever fucking need is in your ender chest.”

“Survivalist instincts,” Phil shrugs. If his experience has taught him anything, it’s that one can never be too prepared. “The chests can carry ungodly amounts of stuff, Tommy, and even people who have them usually don’t realize how much you can squeeze. Plus, nothing can damage whatever’s inside. There’s no reason not to fill it with as many things as possible.”

Hence the ridiculous number of emeralds he has. As well as stacks of gold and silver coins, iron bars and diamonds cut clearer than wine glass, twisted shapes of bold, black netherite and a variety of other metals and gems, all of which piled up could be mistaken for a dragon’s hoard.

And that only takes up about a third of the space. Granted, quite a bit is empty now, furs laid out into bedding and blankets, most of the food used up on the trip to the mountains. They’re running low on other materials as well - nails, for example. Fireworks, if not for flying then at least as a signal or weapon.

Those worries can be easily taken care of soon, however.

“You gotta eat, Wilbur,” Techno suddenly interrupts. “Come on.”

Wilbur sighs in a stretched, squeezing way, but begins forking fish from his barely touched plate.

Phil tries not to tense, feathers itching to vibrate. In stress or fear, he doesn’t know.

Does that mean something? Should he encourage Wilbur to eat more? Or will it only curl Wilbur deeper into his shell, faced with authority, the way such tactics with Tommy often turn out?

He doesn’t know. It’s a strange world, where Techno calls out such problems better than him, but perhaps that’s why Tommy admires Techno so much more.

Phil quickly finishes the last few bites of his own meal, seared and delicate on his tongue.

“You two should go begin work,” he says to Techno and Tommy. “I’ll make sure he finishes.”

Tommy nods, and almost drags Techno out. The latter gives Phil a small frown as he shuffles out the door.

Phil turns his gaze to Wilbur, still shoving food in his mouth methodically. He does look thinner than before. Rags of glaze in his eyes, spindly fingers clutching the handles of his spoon like a clockwork machine.

It's such a reduction from who he used to be before. They have to go back somehow. But how?

Phil curls his wings around Wilbur tighter, and tries to smile.

~\*~

They're relaxed, is what Wilbur notes. The corner of his eye just barely swims through the fog to pinpoint the look of self-assured steadiness on Tommy's face. It's not the relaxation of a family free of scars and shadows - Wilbur's mistakes have made sure of that, but it's getting closer.

Phil's wings seem always to be wandering now. Guiding Tommy's hand here or there, or just curled around one of them, a reassurance of their positions. Wilbur understands the sentiment, but it doesn't change the burning sensation that overcomes him whenever the feathers brush against his skin.

It's pathetic, is what it is. Tommy always leans into it, occasionally brushing the feathers with quick, curious fingers. Wilbur's never seen him grow tired of the action, even now.

They laugh in the distance while setting planks and logs, Techno rolling his eyes as Tommy waves a block of wood around. Wilbur edges further from sight.

He drags another plank over and lines it against its brethren. Rows and rows of wooden faces, grains forever twisted frozen in silent screams when the lifeblood was drained out of them.

And then Phil pushes into view, dark feathers fluttering. Sharp blades in every silver sheen.

"Wilbur, do you want to help Tommy fortify the walls?" he asks, and Wilbur shakes his head before the question even reaches him.

He already knows. Phil tries to talk and act and Wilbur already knows it's all futile. And yet he's still such a coward.

The wood is smoothly cool beneath his fingers. Invisible splinters burrow their way beneath his skin and he doesn't bother to claw them out.

"Where are your gloves?"

Wilbur finds sand in his throat, sinking and sinking. He settles for a shrug.

"Take mine."

"No," he rasps, and turns away. He has the floorboards to lay.

Techno shouts something in the background, and Tommy snips back. They fall into laughter sometime afterwards, quarrels quick and inconsequential as tiny spring breezes. Warmth blooms around him, but always shying away from the bitterness of his touch.



When Wilbur blinks again, his hands are burrowed with sawdust and Techno has a mountain of fluff in his arms.

“Wilbur,” he says, one of his eyes just barely visible as he tilts his head. “You have to get your stuff. We have enough space laid to move in today.”

“...right,” Wilbur finds the ability to say, and turns back to the house.

He passes Tommy clutching the bottom corners of a jukebox, face pressed against its dented surface as he shuffles forward beneath the doorway.

Wilbur slides to the right. His eyes are forward, on the light. It’s blinding,

Tommy’s next to him. They’re both silent.

“Wilbur,” Tommy says, stopping, and the silence is broken.

He would have felt like crying, once upon a time. Now he has only the resolve to stop as well.

Tommy blinks when he doesn’t say anything. Wilbur’s not sure he can, at this point, vision already filming over into the fog. It’s easier, this way.

“Wilbur, I - um, can you help me carry my bed here?”

“Sure,” Wilbur automatically responds, some vestigial part of him still processing the inflections in the way Tommy always requests things. With a slight rise in tone, a cusp of nervousness at the idea of inquiry.

“I’m doing lots of flying - or gliding, whatever the fuck Phil calls it - with the elytra,” Tommy says, and they’re in the cabin. One of Wilbur’s hands is on the bumpy grain of Tommy’s bed.

“It’s really nice actually, like the winds are really cool around here. Phil was kinda upset when he realized his rockets were missing but I can fucking handle myself, you know?”

Phil panicking is predictable, Wilbur thinks. He’s lost one son to recklessness, and he would be devastated to lose another.

Something in his chest seizes at the thought as well. He reaches up to clutch his head.

“Be careful,” he says.

“Oh, not you too,” Tommy sighs. “I *am* careful, I promise! You should join me.”

Wilbur thinks of the tumultuous sky and moss crawled cliffs and mists of clouds that drown every opening in his lungs. The world of white that permeates his entire soul as he drifts in the unknown.

Tommy looks up at him, bright eyes blinking. They’re so bright, still. Brighter, even, or perhaps that’s not the right word. They’re alive. Stubborn flames that have learned the conviction to flare back tenfold from the forces that swipe upon them, singe every bit of skin they can reach.

It’s a dangerous flame, a delicate balance, but what Wilbur wouldn’t give to have given Tommy such a resolve just a few months earlier, back in the walls of Pogtopia.

The cliffs begin whispering again, mind pulling forth.

“You shouldn’t want me to,” Wilbur says, and Tommy has a brief expression of furrowed confusion before something like sorrow - or despair, perhaps, line the edges of frustration in bitten lips.

He doesn’t say more on the topic. Tommy’s voice slowly fades, and his hands keep moving.

The fog hazes. It floats. Wilbur shields himself behind the curtain.

“I didn’t mean it, you know,” Tommy says, and they’re dragging the wooden frame of the bed with them.

The mirror shatters.

Wilbur somehow finds the energy to curse his mind for never allowing him rest. He deserves it, of course, but it doesn’t mean he likes it.

He’s always been selfish like that.

“To say all those things, about - about you. That you didn’t deserve any of this or whatever.” Tommy shifts, the trails of hesitation catching his words like dandelion duff. “You were a good brother to me, Wilbur. You still - you can still be one.”

Wilbur focuses on the lines of floorboards, sanded down to their raw core. Bare. They’re taunting him, asking him his deepest desires, balling the words up and through his throat.

He doesn’t want to. He has to. He can’t run. His lungs are sandbags and-

“I’m sorry.” He chokes out the offer in a pathetic rasp.

“I know,” Tommy says. “I know.”

*It’s not enough.*

*More.*

He can’t.

Wilbur closes his eyes, and his mind is once again swallowed in a sinking plunge by the ocean’s beneath.

~\*~

“Mellohi or Cat?”

Tommy shrugs, so Techno swipes the disc centered with purple and slides it in the jukebox. Moves a torch further against the wall, shadows once again swirled in pantomimes above them.

To the crackling of two smelting furnaces, in the corner of the ravine they’re taken rest in after a long day, Mellohi’s drawling waltz begins to hum. Techno closes his eyes as the strings join in a stilted harmony.

It’s a type of macabre he enjoys, a sinister undertone that doesn’t trip itself in an attempt to overly dramatize.

“It’s not exactly the taste in music one would expect from you,” he says, and Tommy shrugs.

“I found them - the original discs. So they were mine. With how often Dream was fucking around with everything I don’t think I ever listened to them that often.”

“Making up for lost time,” Phil says. “Always a wise idea.”

“Wouldn’t you know, old man,” Tommy says. Techno nods along, hair grazing the edge of rough stone.

He frowns, and dusts bits of gravel off the pink waves. Wilbur is silent beside him, a common but increasingly disturbing occurrence.

Phil sighs, rolling his eyes, and for a moment Techno thinks he will simply take the jab and move along.

But then his eyes hone with a flicker of resolution and Tommy straightens up with a tilt of his head.

“Too well,” Phil says.

Mellohi decrescendos to a soft, thumping rhythm, expanding to fill the empty spaces of silence between them. Techno glances once again at Wilbur, eyes still fixated on some magnet in the far distance only he can perceive.

He wants to move closer, some reassurance that Wilbur will not disappear forever into whatever fog clouds him. If only it is that simple.

“Yeah,” Tommy says. “Lots of catching up to do.”

*Indeed*, Techno thinks, and there’s a familiar bite at the edges of those words. But all the former bitterness has been shed off this topic now, leaving only tired acknowledgement and the ring of promise to pursue steadier ground.

“Sorry,” Phil says. “I mean - you seem to be doing well enough with the rockets. I could show you more. It’s not the same without actual wings but...”

“Sure. I mean - last thing I need is for Techno to mock me about being Icarus or whatever,” Tommy huffs.

The threads between them tenses, twists, but they no longer seem as insurmountable as before. Techno leans back, allowing himself to slump against the walls.

“I think you’ve broken any mold I can present,” he snorts. “The perils of rationality.”

“Something you can’t have,” Tommy responds.

*It’s not wrong*, is Techno’s first thought. By all rational means he shouldn’t have killed Tubbo, fought Tommy, let Wilbur spiral further and further without intervention - though he still stands by the withers.

“I’m not a rational person,” he settles on. “I don’t aim to be.”

Tommy makes a noise of disbelief - or contempt - and looks away. Phil glances between them with furrowed eyebrows, hand clenched a fraction tighter.

Cold forms a lump in Techno's stomach. But he doesn't say anything else, only immersing further into Mellohi's strings, drawing cantabile echoes around the ravine.

"I think the iron's done smelting," Wilbur says, and Techno whips around to meet a passive, expressionless stare.

"R - right," Phil manages, and stands up. "I'll check."

The field remains untrodden, save for a few wary nudges at the edge of the minezone. So close, yet so far. Even here, on home ground and smooth winds, they can't push forward without hesitation hauling them back like folklore monsters beneath their beds.

Just as imaginary. Just as powerful. Techno doesn't know whether to laugh or cry.

~\*~

It's dark and well past his usual bedtime. Tommy can't sleep.

Neither can Phil, judging by the constant shifting noise. Their first night in the larger house, probably. Old habits die hard, as evidenced by how Techno and Wilbur have their beds pushed together in a different corner (after Techno insisted on it for an hour and Wilbur relented only after Tommy jumped in to agree it's a good idea).

It means him and Phil's semi-whispered conversations can still go on, though no doubt Techno picks up on the buzz of their murmurings. Not that he's sleeping right now either, form unnaturally still on the bed, so Tommy doesn't feel that terrible about it.

And Wilbur never pays attention anymore.

"I'm not - well, I'm still mad, but not like... before," Tommy mutters into the darkness. Phil hums back in response, before the muted shuffle of blankets sounds.

"You have every right to be mad about... well, all three of us," he says. The words are familiar to Tommy, a net of reassurance, but it will never be enough to ease the turmoil of uncertainty inside of him. Phil knows this. So does Techno.

"But we have to - I'm living with you guys and I gotta figure this shit out," he says in response. Tommy's not sure why he's so hung up on the idea, just that it's a nagging persistence only worsening as the days pass by.

If this is what that whole "character growth" thing Techno drones on and on about is, then for the first time Tommy feels sorry for those characters.

"We will," Phil sighs. "Why didn't - I didn't want to seem overbearing before, but I need to ask eventually. Why didn't you tell me about using the rockets?"

Good fucking question. Tommy's not quite sure either - he could be, but it's a decision he hasn't thought that much of beyond surface level.

*Whoops*, he suddenly realizes. Wilbur's silence wasn't deafening before, while Tommy was in the middle of it, but now it loops in his head with an uncomfortableness akin to scraping glass.

"Um - well, you wouldn't have let me," he admits. "And I wanted to anyway."

“...true, not without me there,” Phil says. “The rockets are a good failsafe, especially since those are duds that don’t explode. But why-”

Tommy hears Phil’s voice crack, like a wrench forcibly yanking the words from his throat.

“I...” he bits his lip. *This is fucking hard*, he thinks. *Wilbur’s onto something, alright. Damnit.* “I think I wanted to prove something. Like I wasn’t - always so fucking dependent, you know?”

First it had been Phil, taking him in and providing food while Tommy had tried to figure out how long it would take to get kicked out. Then it was Wilbur, raising him in a way Phil lacked, whispering reassurances and explaining the mysterious world around them, magic and music and the deep, intricate wells of history.

Techno had helped, but it was always Wilbur in the end, and so Tommy had followed Wilbur to Dream’s Kingdom, the SMP. Through the L’Manberg War for Independence, and then into exile, and then... back with Phil, here.

Tommy, the child. A naive, stupid child. Does what he’s told, a pawn manipulated on so many levels. Always following.

“Wanted to follow myself for once,” he mutters, eyelids shutting. “Was stupid, I know.”

“Do you feel better afterwards?” Phil asks.

Tommy’s eyes flare open again at the question, so different from the reprimand he had been expecting.

“Yes,” he admits, and then pauses. “Well, about the flying itself. Then I realized I had to talk to you, and then it was like, *oh shit, fuck*, Phil’s gonna be so mad, so - yeah.”

“It was a risk,” Phil says. “I’m not going to ban you from anything - well, unless it’ll definitely get you killed. But you have the totem, don’t you?”

Tommy presses two fingers against cold, smooth gold, the tiny statue laced into a bracelet against his left wrist.

“Yeah,” he says.

“And you wear it as a bracelet?”

“I can’t-” Tommy finds himself swallowing before he can stop. “The chain’s gotta be strong, yeah? But I don’t wanna get fucking choked with it or whatever.”

“I understand that idea,” Phil says. Tommy wonders how true that is. But it’s not relevant right now.

“You could reshape the gold.”

“What?” Tommy turns and runs his fingers across the rounded head of the totem.

“The magic is imbued in the gold, but gold is malleable,” Phil says. “And a good conductor too, which is why so many magical artefacts are made of it. It contains and transmits energy well. Also why you can get higher enchantments with gold.”

“So you mean I can melt and - and shape it?”

“The magic that’ll revive you will still work fine, as long as you don’t completely melt it. Just a bit of heat. You can even get rid of the emeralds if you want - they increase the reach of the magic as a sort of conductor to surrounding life, but if it’s just straight up touching you all the time that doesn’t matter.”

“That’s fucking pog,” Tommy breathes. “Could we - could we make a piece of gold wire with sharpness 10 and slice the green bitch in half with it?”

“If you really want to,” Phil laughs. “It would take a lot of books and energy though.”

“Well, first is making this bracelet my bitch,” he grins. Phil chuckles.

There’s a pause, and Tommy’s tempted to roll over and try sleeping again. His eyelids feel heavier by the second, a drowsy softness settling into his bones.

“For the record, I’m not mad at you,” Phil suddenly says. Tommy blinks. “Worried, maybe, but I try to keep it reasonable. Just - again, let me know next time, okay? After everything with L’Manberg I feel like I always need to know. About things like this.”

Guilt worms its way into Tommy at that, heavy in his chest. Wilbur’s words, his declaration of L’Manberg’s tyranny will forever haunt him, but Phil’s is - well, regret is a fucking bitch alright. A different kind, for Phil, and Tommy thinks he’s beginning to recognize the scope of its implications.

“Right,” he swallows. His chest twists uncomfortably, like slowly peeling back old bandages, skin and crusts of blood still clinging desperately to familiar blankness. “And - well, I’m still kinda mad, but we’ll talk this shit out or whatever. Later. I’m trying to sleep.”

“Right. Goodnight, Tommy,” Phil whispers with a slight chuckle, and Tommy yawns before turning back beneath his covers.

“Goodnight, Phil,” he murmurs, and falls asleep to a soft, assenting sigh.

~\*~

*The clouds are swirling with dread. Gray as ashen basalt, weeping quicksand as they sink into him. Wilbur’s mouth opens. His lungs are swarmed with gravel and grit and that sinking, weeping quicksand, chokingly leaden. Stuffed like a bag of flour, silent and still.*

*He’s on a cliff again. It’s fitting, he supposes. The darkness roils like a sea below him, and he wouldn’t be surprised if it ran all the way down to whatever cold underworld exists in this twisted universe.*

*A shadow drifts over, mouth hinged in a silent scream as his eyes stab into Wilbur’s. Tears roll down the dark, wispy face like beads of lava.*

*Wilbur can’t move. His body is some toy, wobbling back and forth on an invisible axis like his legs have been replaced by a sphere of stone and he has to move and he can’t move-*

*I’m sorry, he tries to say. I miss you.*

*But his lungs are full and his windpipe thinner than guitar strings.*

*“It’s not enough,” the shadow hisses, yanking wires through his mind, stepping forward. “Repent.”*

*But I can’t.*

*Wilbur has to move. He tries to move. He can't. He's anchored to the cracked, dry dirt beneath him, still wobbling helplessly back and forth.*

*Are they in a desert now?*

*The cliff is still there.*

*"You must. You have to-"*

*I can't.*

*"You want to. You want to be loved, don't you?"*

*I can't.*

*"Oh, but you'll have to." The shadow advances. "Or I'll make you."*

*Wilbur gasps and shoves his rolling body back with a pitiful scrounge of desperation. The force bobs him around on the rounded base below, spinning foolishly beneath the clouds. His lungs are still packed full.*

*He thinks there are tears on his own cheeks. He doesn't know for sure. He doesn't know anything for sure, except that he can't he can't please don't make him he has to-*

*The shadow reaches out with a wisp of fingers. Wilbur recoils and slams his head on some invisible wall, mirrored like ice and freezing with the edge of sharp steel. He shuts his eyes.*

*I'm sorry.*

*"Not enough," the shadow snarls, reaching out again with a heat cored with burning lava and Wilbur's mind shrieks as it suddenly lunges forward.*

***"NOT ENOUGH!"***

*Wilbur slams his head down and down and down again against the cracked dirt and there's something breaking and the touch is burning his face and he has to move he can't be here why is he here-*

*With a sudden lurch of his world the cliffs fall away. The shadow flares up wings of golden fire and soars and the darkness is so, so cold. Ice frosts over his lips with a final stitch of the needle.*

*The world is blind, and he is the blindest of them all, and nothing will ever reach for him again.*

## Chapter End Notes

Was not expecting Tommy to be this self aware lol but that's the way it went. As always, I greatly appreciate all the support for this fic!! There've been so many comments and I've been extra tired lately so I've been taking really long to reply to them. Might reach a point where I have to take back my previous words since I can't respond to everyone, but rest assured I definitely read everyone's comment.

As always, thanks for reading, and thanks to the betas!

(i reply to comments lives! [twitch](#)

[tumblr](#) and [twitter](#) for questions and art!)



# the meandering path to freedom

## Chapter Notes

[discord](#) to get pings for updates/discuss stuff!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

He's back here again. His mind always drags back to the cliffs, stumbling in the dark as a shivering, ragged mess. The last remnants of an ideal now crushed to ink history's pages.

It has taken a while to move past Techno's defenses, but even gods have to sleep some time. And Wilbur, despite his former reputation, knows the benefits of shadows.

Perhaps this path has always been destined for him.

He sits down, the cliff's sharp edges digging into skin. His feet dangle above caressing air and a drop so steep nothing can be seen save for blots of gray and blackened mist.

Wilbur breaths out, throat trembling. The moon judges, a half slice of paleness above.

*No*, he thinks. *I can't*.

*Not this, not that. Still delaying in the inbetween.*

He digs his palms into the stone and drags his legs up, feet glancing against the cragged edges. For a frozen moment Wilbur teeters on the line of freedom, spinning. *He can escape*.

But he jerks back and turns his gaze to the house. The night is old and sinking.

*I can't*, he thinks, and he wants to cry, choke out sobs until the shame and frustration and forever lingering sense of defeat drains out with them in an icy cold torrent of grief.

*Not today.*

~\*~

"Do you want a guitar, Wilbur?" Phil asks. "Or some similar instrument? When we eventually go down to the village I can ask around."

"No," Wilbur says, and the flat tone shuts the beginnings of the argument down right then and there. Techno glances between the two, and clears his throat.

"Wilbur," he says, suppressing a nervous tremor in his tone. He can't show hesitation here. Not such a weakness. He never shows weakness, especially not in situations such as these.

Techno's mind loops this mantra, a thin string that anchors precariously all the scattered thoughts which fly about. "Wilbur, I want to ask you something."

He glances at Phil, head tilting ever so slightly towards the door. It's been a few days since they've moved into the house, and the internal walls that make up their separate rooms are now laid out in measurements, beams, logs of support. Dark planks.

They are not, however, soundproof. Phil acknowledges the message with a nod.

"I'll go help Tommy with his flying," he says, glancings between the two. "But..."

"I'll let you know," Techno says. *You won't be in the dark about Wilbur again.*

Phil nods, and closes the door.

"Wilbur," Techno says. Wilbur turns to him, ever so slightly.

*Don't mess this up,* he thinks. *Don't. Can't.*

"You mutter to yourself when you write your journal sometimes," he begins, and Wilbur stiffens. "I can tell it's not been a very - uh, stress relievin' exercise."

"You haven't-" Wilbur takes a step back, shoulders hunching in a way that's far too fearful, eyes pinned on a predator about to pounce. Techno's breath catches his throat.

Does Wilbur really...?

"I haven't," he says, reluctant to pursue that train of thought. With a bit of hesitation he takes a step back as well. The space between them widens.

Wilbur's gaze is still pinned itself against him.

"I'm your brother, Wilbur," Techno says in as even a tone as possible. Too soft is a threat lurking and too loud is a menacing surprise. "We've lived together for half our lives."

"You don't need to get involved," Wilbur hisses.

*Get involved.* How else does Wilbur see it? Meddling, prying, invasions of privacy into whatever dungeon he's trapped himself in?

"I gave you that journal," Techno whispers. Sharpness catches his throat, and he tries not to choke. *Don't mess up again, stop failing, try harder.* "I know how much you love to write. But it's meant to be an escape, Wilbur, not a snare."

"It *is* an escape."

"Not the one you should be taking."

The words pin them both down, and despite it all, it still feels like predator and prey. Technoblade, purpose always looming behind him. No matter how much he tries, he can never break that mold.

"Wilbur," he tries again, because there is nothing left to do. "I don't think you should write for a while."

"Techno," Wilbur says. His eyes are hard for the first time since they left the SMP. They glitter with a dangerous determination. "I think you should check on Tommy and Phil."

Techno has no response. He can't do this.

*You have to.*

He can't.

*But you have to.*

"Wilbur," he says. "What are you doin'?"

No response.

"I think I'll stay here," Techno says, and they both understand what *here* means.

Wilbur sits down on his bed, and closes his eyes. Techno moves over and settles next to him.

"Alright," Wilbur says finally, and the resignation in his tone grips Techno's heart with a pounding fear he has no means of resolving.

*Useless*, Techno thinks, and he can feel the stoicism melting off his face, leaving only tiredness - and a tint of his own fear. A pathetic sight for Wilbur, no doubt.

*What's a blade without a target?*

*Nothing.*

~\*~

This night, Techno reads.

The book is one acquired from a passing traveler on the way here, with the sheen of newly-bound leather. *50 Untold Tales* is the title, with a blurb that claims the collections of short stories within would have been lost to time, had they not been saved by the collector.

Profit off the work of others, then, but who is Techno to complain of such practices?

He's halfway through so far. A previous scan of the table of contents means that as he opens to the next story, a sense of dread worms its way into him.

*Raven Songs*

*By Whitelisted*

*Preface: Whitelisted is the sole pseudonym of an author, rumored to be some king or distinguish war general, who has seen the success of many of their works - here includes one their few works which is still unknown, until now.*

*The story of how I acquired this tale is a strange one. As some may be aware, after the second explosion of L'Manberg President Tubbo held an auction of various items to raise funds for rebuilding. Among these items auctioned is a book containing stories alleged to have been written by Whitelisted himself. Supposedly, Whitelisted had been a close friend of Wilbur Soot and Tommy Innit, former exiled leaders of L'Manberg, and aided them during the time. These stories, if President Tubbo is to be believed, were written during this period and lost during the explosion before they could be published, having only been recently found again.*

*It certainly matches Whitelisted's writing style, if more metaphorical in nature than their usual works. Either way, Raven Songs is a strange haunting tale.*

*Ravens are songbirds.*

*Despite their reputations, they are songbirds, and their vocal ranges are among the most impressive in the animal world. Some say that for certain ravens, there is something magical, otherworldly about their songs, deep layers of harmonics left ringing in the mind long after the waves themselves have silenced.*

*Once there was a raven who soared the skies and brushed the valleys and whose songs entranced all that listened. The raven had silvered eyes and soft feathers and the love of his friends and family.*

*"We should mark a territory so others cannot impose their tyranny upon us," said the raven one day to his flock, and he sang a familiar tune. A territory was marked and a nation built, an organization of power with the raven's song at its pinnacle.*

*His flock swarmed around the raven's songs of hope and glory, and so every day the raven wakes with a fire that burns brighter than the last.*

*But there were forces that eyed the raven's ascent with offended eyes, for the territory the ravens had marked they deemed encroached onto theirs.*

*Ravens are songbirds, and songbirds wish to sing freely. War chokes the lungs, stifles the voice, burdens the mind. The raven's songs slowly spluttered, losing its shine and dulled with a heaviness his flock no longer wanted to hear.*

*The territory's legitimacy was established eventually, but with a cost that ravaged families and tore their new home to pieces.*

*Balances of power can shift so abruptly. Conflict is the main instigator. Through popular votes the raven was removed, and the flock presented power to the likes of another.*

*Competition is good for the whole, bad for the individual. And so the slide of power shifted in accordance, and the raven was then banished.*

*But the raven was not done. His home, his people, his dreams choked out - with nothing left to lose he had everything to regain.*

*His songs grew darker, but they grew more captivating as well. Where they once inspired hope they now entranced despair. Promises of glory became promises of revenge.*

*Some which supported the raven in exile slowly distanced themselves, while others tried to calm him with all the wrong ideas. A very few, however, encouraged the descent, whispering validations or participated with an idleness that presented justification.*

*And so, betrayed and stripped of everything, the raven planned.*

*It is said that the raven's songs became so overpowering it choked all rationale from the listener's mind. That they were the very embodiment of madness itself, of regret and pain and furious vengeance all wailing in a symphony without an end.*

*Eventually the raven returned, and sang, and his flock was driven so mad by his songs they tore each other to pieces in a frenzy of blood and fury, and the nation disbanded in chaos.*

*The raven, they say, still wanders the world with slitted silvered eyes and tangled, matted feathers. That he spreads the song of vengeance wherever he flies, and that nations born of bloodshed, leadership teetering, should always be wary of his looming presence.*

*For the world is full of traitors, and all it takes is a single song to set the scene alight.*

Techno closes the book with a too loud snap and shuts his eyes.

Of course Tubbo would do that, of course, and it makes practical sense, but he wishes he could march across the sea and slap the idiot in the face right now. He *is* an orphan, isn't he?

The story had come from a moment of impulse, observing Wilbur's descent. Techno had considered burning the pages afterwards, realizing its numerous awkward implications, but ultimately left the book in his hidden base. He had reasoned he could pack it away or get rid of it after the revolution.

Turns out, emeralds were not the only thing Tubbo had stolen.

He takes a deep breath, and reaches out to open the ender chest that sits in the corner of their living room. Wilbur can't read about this, at least not for a very long time.

He'll have to be more careful in the future. He always has to be more careful, but-

Techno leans back in his chair, rubbing the sides of his head. Wilbur should be asleep by now, in their room.

Why couldn't he do something right with relationships for once?

~\*~

But now the night is young, and it is unforgiving.

The trees whisper when he walks between them, eyes in every shadowed spot. Rattling branches lap each other in the canopy above. A futile return.

The moonlight path rivers through the forest, watery and weeping like clouds. When his feet touch down Wilbur imagines continuing to sink, deeper and deeper.

It's a clear night. Snow freshly fallen in the day, all of them shut inside from dawn to dusk as a blizzard raged. Wilbur stumbles his way through piles that reach high as his waist at times, batting away soft, cold fluff as he continues on that familiar path.

He's wearing his old exile outfit, the brown coat and thin white shirt.

The world is silent. The sky clear with starlight sparkling, moon rounded. Nothing stirs but Wilbur, still swimming through an ocean of snow.

*Quite appropriate*, he thinks. He wonders if he can drown himself in it, shove his throat raw with scratching crystals and collapse deep into the universal cold.

But he would feel warm, he remembers. The body's response to hypothermia.

He's not sure he can face that. The warmth is terrifying. It reaches out, transcends his dreams and constricts with every breath of life he takes.

The very edge of the cliffs have only a small swath of snow to cover them, wind constantly battering at the pile. Wilbur brushes it all away and sits down on the ridges.

If he looks down far enough, he thinks he can just barely make out a collection of glowing lights where the mountains join in valleys.

Time drags on. The world darkens further, and shrouds with the chill of premature blizzards.

At first Wilbur thinks it's another delusion his mind has conjured, when the first flakes brush his cheek, but then he blinks and the white is battering further.

*Well*, he thinks, and considers.

~\*~

Phil wakes to two words that strike him with more fear than any nightmare ever could.

"Wilbur's gone,"

"Where?" He shoots up and whips to Techno even as the answer rises up in that treacherously familiar way.

"Outside, presumably," Techno says. Tommy's eyes flicker between them, a paler bluer than clear winter skies. His face matches that paleness as he too scrambles out of bed.

Phil almost flies as he sprints to the door, donning his coat on the way out. Tommy is unnaturally silent as he copies him, save for a muttered swear as his bootlaces get tangled.

Techno is out and ahead of them all somehow, which Phil has a split moment to be grateful for.

It's snowing. A near blizzard, though not quite.

A great, sinking feeling weighs into Phil's being. The world is shades of white and black, like some death has sucked the color away from them.

He can't stop thinking back, to L'Manberg and explosions and *not again*.

*It can't happen again.*

*He's not too late, is his first thought when he sees Wilbur hunched before the button. He can still fix this.*

*He can help Wilbur, he can save Tommy's hopes, he can make sure they're the family they once were.*

*Then Wilbur whispers, "it was never meant to be," and all of Phil's hopes crumble the moment Wilbur turns back to him, mouth twisted in a sneer and eyes too wide and hungry.*

*Like that of a man who has nothing left to anticipate in his life but the release of death.*

*He stares into the blade and not into Philza, no matter how much his gaze is searched and how desperately Phil begs.*

*And Phil still had the audacity to think,*

*“It’s not too late.”*

~\*~

The rocks are sharp and jagged below the cliff. It’s a long fall. On most nights Wilbur can’t make out any semblance of the terrain, but under a full moon and starry constellations the pale shades are visible. A sea of waving grays, occasional pearly white. The snow is far less down there, shielded by the rest of the mountain, the winds that blow from the opposite seaward side.

*“I heard there was a special place.”*

Wilbur finds the words creeping out, rising in their terrible, terrible phrases.

*“Where men could go and emancipate.”*

L’Manberg, his unfinished symphony. That thing Tubbo’s built up - it’s not L’Manberg.

*“The brutality and the tyranny of their rulers.”*

L’Manberg was founded on lies. On poison. On ideals shattered before they had ever left Wilbur’s mouth, documents dripping of resentment. Nothing that could ever support a nation.

Some would say that whatever Tubbo’s leading - that it’s better. Wilbur was never a leader who held the best interests of his citizens at heart, after all.

*“And some may say this place is real,”*

He chokes, and closes his eyes.

*“But I know for sure, that you’ll still kneel,*

*To the brutality, and the tyranny of their rulers.”*

His L’Manberg.

*“My L’Manberg, my L’Manberg.”*

His symphony, forever unfinished.

*“My L’Manberg, my L’Manberg.”*

New words trace his mind. Still static and glitched from disuse, but they come forth all the same. Music already set, so what are a few poetic lines? They rise from the seas in a current burning his lungs.

*“Now just a crater, full of lies,*

*Promises broken, unheard cries,*

*Noteblock choirs rotting in the sunshine.”*

Does this count, finishing his symphony?

Wilbur once read of ghosts. Spirits that linger beyond death, anchored by some unfinished business. Most stayed around forever - after all, disregarding desire, what change could they bring about without a body to accompany it?

*“And what they don’t know, of their home,*

*It’s a place that’s forever lost and blown,*

*Its glory, it was never meant to be.”*

He hopes all his business is finished, or whatever he considers unfinished business. It’s all so subjective, anyways, and shouldn’t the ghost decide? It seems an existence worse than whatever he has right now. An agency with no means of furthering it - paradoxically aimless.

Tommy would drag him back with a furious scream, Wilbur knows. He has every right to.

But Wilbur is so tired. He’s tired of ghosts, of pasts, of mistakes clawing every thought that flits through his sorry excuse of a mind. He’s even tired of L’Manberg, in a way.

So his symphony is unfinished. So it’s modified, parodied, stripped of its original context.

For once, Wilbur thinks, *so what?*

He can’t do anything about it. He never could.

*“My L’Manberg,”* he whispers, the motion so familiar, slipping from his mouth like tears. *“My L’Manberg. Dead L’Manberg.”*

He takes a deep breath. Closes his eyes. Heat rises in his chest, unbidden, an aura of sickly death in the face of the cold. It's snowing strong, he registers faintly. Almost a blizzard.

And everything is burning, like Wilbur is the lone torch in the wide, open world.

He’s sorry, he realizes almost hysterically. He’s so sorry. And yet.

*“Still my L’Ma...”* the winds are harsh, pounding against his back, it’s so easy to lean forward.

*“...an...an...berg.”*

*He is falling.*

*He is falling.*

*It’s so cold.*

Flashing white. Sharp, cracking jolts. Pain bursts like dying stars within him.

*He is blind, and he has fallen, nothing will ever reach for him again.*



ah, hm. Yeah.

:D

by the way ive been neglecting a lot of other stuff so gotta take another break from writing this for a while. dont be surprised if the next update is in like early march. still love feedback.

(i reply to comments lives! [twitch](#)

[tumblr](#) and [twitter](#) for questions and art!)

# shipwreck in a sea of faces

## Chapter Notes

[discord](#) to get pings for updates/discuss stuff!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Techno stands at the edge of cliffs, and wonders what it would feel like to stare down into its depths and *hear* its crooning, twisted melodies, scrabbling with all purchase in the echoes of his mind.

To wish for its embrace so readily that all mortal tethers fray down to nothingness.

“He’s not here,” he whispers as Phil rushes down in a flurry of sharp feathers. *He’s gone*, Techno doesn’t say. Words hold such tantalizing power for the mind.

But Phil understands.

“You - you know he-”

“Yes,” Techno says, but sheets of snow that swarm around them muffle his reply to almost oblivion. Too dark, stars blotted and the moon hiding behind its sea of murkied curtains.

He could almost fool himself into believing they’re in a black box with only the icy storm to keep them company, a raging army with an intention to conceal Wilbur’s life away.

“But he’s not surviving again in this weather either,” he says quietly.

Through the darkness, a curtain of feathers brushes down Techno’s arm. He presses closer to Phil. Glances back.

“Where’s Tommy?” he asks, the thought sudden flaring. Another bout of panic seizes as he feels his mind splitting - Tommy, not Tommy, they can’t lose him to the impenetrable coldness as well.

“I’m here,” a small voice calls through the gloom - but no, Tommy’s close enough to be at the edge of his sight, bundled in so many layers he seems twice his usual size. “Not that I can see anything with this fucking cloth over my eye,” he adds with a mild hint of annoyance.

“I told you to stay back,” Phil says, and another wing brushes out. “You promised you’d stay safe.”

“I’m very warm, Phil,” Tommy retorts. “But I don’t think Wilbur is.”

Techno freezes, and so does Phil. Tommy stills with widened eyes. For a terrible moment they’re all forced to reexperience that cold cloud of dread settle within their hearts all over again, that Wilbur’s gone and not here and-

“No,” Techno manages. “But he’s-”

“I know what you did with the totem, by the way,” Tommy says. He’s not trembling, and Techno doubts he could, wrapped stiff as he is, but there’s a familiar, terrified warble to his tone that sends

him reeling back to the festival for another awful moment.

“And I heard it,” Tommy continues.

Techno’s mind stutters to a halt.

“What?” Phil rushes forward and grips Tommy’s shoulders, mittens bending at unnatural angles.

“I heard the - that exploding sound,” Tommy said. “When I was back in that area you told me to stay in. It was way below us, I’m sure.”

*That’s why he came here,* Techno realizes. *To tell us.*

“Below us?” Phil repeats.

*Below them.*

So Wilbur had jumped. So Wilbur had died. So the totem was set off.

So Wilbur was - in some ocean of snow, buried deep and unknowing.

A needle in a haystack, a body on a mountain, floating aimlessly in the white.

*How long has it been?*

Wilbur had been wearing his old Pogtopia coat, thin leather and singed edges.

Techno has not cried in a decade. He can’t now. Especially not with how fast his tears will freeze - *and that’s what you worry about*, the insidiousness whispers.

But he can’t. He can’t, not when he’s failed once, not when the rest of his - his *family* is...

“I change my mind, I’m fucking cold,” Tommy suddenly says. “We need to find Wilbur before my blood literally freezes.”

“Tommy-”

“I survived the revolution and Dream and everything else, I can’t fucking die here and neither can Wilbur-”

“Then Tommy, you’re going back to the house,” Phil cuts in, and the words thaw the frozen of Techno’s mind enough for him to rush forward and begin dragging Tommy through the clogging snow.

“What - but Wilbur!” Tommy twists, but Techno’s grip is firm. Fingers tightening with the desperation of a fresh, dripping wound.

“You’re not staying out here,” Techno manages in response. “We’re not risking you freezing to death.”

*Too.*

He was supposed to keep watch. He was supposed to make sure Wilbur didn’t - didn’t do *exactly* what he had feared he would do.

He shouldn't have been sleeping. This is why Techno doesn't sleep - look where it has led him to, crystaled ice like daggers plunging into everything he cares for. With Wilbur gone and his frosted black eyes forever staring accusingly into his soul.

His breath catches again.

Are they so willing to accept Wilbur's death? That so soon, he is now gone?

Techno would scream, but his throat has long since been silenced, dead from years of neglect. All humanity stripped down to drying blood. Instead, he quickens his pace, Phil following in halted steps behind them. Tommy stiffens and stumbles, scowl so clear even without a visual.

"I'm fine-"

"Tell me that again," Techno says, voice wavering. "That you're fine. That we're fine. That you would do this to us."

It's a cheap trick that presses yet another anvil against his chest, but Tommy quiets at the accusation. And then his feet begin dragging forward as well, trailing tear lines in the gray washed ground.

He can't cry. He can't scream. He can only move and do and even then he *can't*.

He gave Wilbur that journal, he thinks faintly. He confronted his brother - and failed - so many times. Meaningless squabbles to the end, was that all it was? Vigil kept, but not enough?

His grip tightens, steps wider. Techno has already lost so much by his own mistakes. He can't lose Tommy as well.

~\*~

Trudging between sheer cliffs and hidden cracks that could swallow legs whole, he finally decides he had made a dumb decision.

In his defense, it wasn't supposed to snow tonight.

*You already got the rocks. Just get out,* he thinks. Of all the reasons to die, freezing while collecting pretty rocks for his garden in the middle of the night is not what he has imagined.

He turns and fixes his eyes back to the village, where a soft, candled glow emanates from the window of one of the houses.

Just as he is about to take a shaky step forward, a loud explosion rocks his head. He hisses, kneeling into the snow to steady himself, vision doubling into misty duplicates.

*What was that?* A tree exploding, as they have been known to do when enough of their sap freezes? But the sound is different, ringing with a persistent screech that seems to have taken howling residence in his head. Too sharp, too... powerful.

It's suddenly colder, too. The storm has picked up, but this is a different type of cold, like the strange, otherworldly *wrongness* of Nether portals. He can't put a finger on it, but what he does know is that the weather is absolutely not responsible.

With a slight shake, he pulls the fur trim of his hood tighter and stands up to turn around.

There's a golden tingle in the air, he realizes, though it's fading. They glimmer even in the darkness, silent and almost judging, in a way.

There's a body in the snow.

The thought registers suddenly, first with confusion and then with a sharp alarm, and he hastily picks his way over.

There's also blood. Lots of it, leaking from twisted joints and other indiscernible locations.

Something's definitely broken, he thinks with a wince as he slowly pokes a leg. He's no doctor, but he can definitely see that much.

Where the fuck did this person come from? The cliffs above? What idiot goes mountaineering in the middle of the night?

He suppresses a huff at that thought. At the very least, he kept his adventures to the base of the mountains, gentle slopes and winds muffled to the restraints of filtering barriers.

A quick decision is made, and he sets his basket of stones on the ground. Hauls the person onto his arms with a stumble. The body's not heavy, but he's not exactly strong either.

Great, the blood's soaking into his coat.

With a sigh, he begins the trek back down to the village.

~\*~

"I have to check the area," Phil says. "You know I'm the only one who can."

Techno nods, jerkily.

"Don't - don't do anything stupid, Phil," Tommy says. "I fucking swear, if anything happens, I'll - I'll..."

"I know," Phil says through the wind. And his wings snap up against the snow.

Flying down the mountain in this weather is a miserable endeavor, icy snow catching every corner of his feathers in beads of sharp coldness. The wind thrashes, nature's raging gray torrents. Through it all are lines of curly gold, drawing him forth.

And thoughts break, as they are prone to do.

He couldn't stop Wilbur. Phil has failed - yet again. Even if it wasn't by his own blade - well.

If Wilbur is dead, then he's failed his promise to Techno as well, and at least - at least Techno tried.

Was there some turning point Phil had missed? A single conversation, single action that could have altered it all? Dragged Wilbur back from the dredges of his mind? Or was it a slow march Phil had always pushed and prodded, but never paid due attention too, always hovering hesitance at its blackened waves?

He had taken a responsibility the moment he took Wilbur in and declared him his son, so full of elation at the idea of a family back then.

Would it have been better, to leave Wilbur to his devices, still singing for money on dusty streets? To have merely tossed some coins his way and given a brief, fleeting smile, acknowledged the reality that he was not, would never, be cut out for fatherhood?

Was... was Phil the one who killed Wilbur?

The cold sinks through the lining of his boots and too thin wool of leggings, but he's beyond caring at this point.

He takes a deep breath as he stumbles through the landing, and begins clawing aside a chalky draft of snow. Gold shimmers, stilling airily around him, impermeable to the winds. Magic does not bow to the whims of such forces.

But. Phil glances around, kicking aside more snow as he stalks the area. Nothing.

Tommy must be close to shelter by now, the thought springs forth. That's good.

But Wilbur - Wilbur is nowhere to be found, despite the golden magic that still lingers to whatever wisps of moonlight which has gathered enough will to suffuse back onto this plane of cold, cold existence.

He continues digging, and listening, and watching, fingers slowly losing circulation, each breath more labored.

Eventually, Phil is forced to confront a truth.

He can't stay out here too long, not unless he wants to risk hypothermia and frostbite and-

And he can't do that to Tommy. Or Techno. Again.

Phil's wings feel like melting mercury as he lifts back up into the storm, cloyed in heavy sorrow and dripping with toxic indecision.

When he limps through the door on half-numb feet, Techno is fumbling with a blanket, shedding waves of blue over Tommy's shoulders.

Tommy is shaking, despite the fireplace that roars in front of him.

"He's - I can't find him," Phil says. "But I don't think - I mean, the magic is still there-"

"I don't believe he's dead either," Techno whispers as soon as Phil shuts the door tight against pummeling forces that lash against them.

Phil bunches a fistful of feathers between his fingers, wings hissing in silent protest. Sharp keratin scrapes down into skin like needled spite.

*Stay calm*, he knows. *Stay calm*.

Because now Tommy is crying. All previous conviction stripped down, husk and all, rotting away in wisps of shadowed disbelief.

Tommy is crying. Tommy is curled up before the blazing fire with sobs ratcheting every movement, fingers twitching uselessly for some phantom assurance that Wilbur was still here with them. Tommy is - is-

“Tommy,” Phil says uselessly. His feathers tremble against the grain of invisible threads, tying them all together in a dance of regret. Too slow, too fast.

Too little, too much.

“Tommy, I flew down there,” he continues, because despite everything, Phil has to press on. “On the way back. I couldn’t find a body anywhere.”

“Where the fuck does a body end up in the middle of a place like this?” Tommy gasps, and the bitterness leaks through harsh and clear as broken glass. “6 feet under, Phil! I’m not fucking stupid!”

The pain, and bitterness. There’s so much of it, and it drowns them all in icy realization. When did Tommy accumulate such heaviness to life? When did he learn to leave it pooled so deep within himself?

At Phil and Techno’s silence, he turns back away and closes his eyes.

“But Wilbur’s not dead,” he says, in almost the exact same way Techno did earlier. “He’s not, he can’t be - we didn’t come so close to-”

His eyes somehow shut even tighter.

“Don’t give me hope like that,” he breathes raggedly. “Don’t. Please don’t.”

“The totem gives temporary immunity for a few minutes after being set off,” Phil says, because that’s all the comfort he can provide. “Tommy, after Techno took you back here I searched for at least 20 more minutes around the area, and I couldn’t find any trace of Wilbur. The only thing I can think of is that...”

“Wilbur’s either dead,” Techno finishes with a dull note of defeat. “Or gone in a different way.”

Tommy chokes, another sob grasping his throat. Techno kneels down and slowly, shakingly wraps an arm around his shoulders.

With yet another cloud of ice crawling up inside of him, Phil moves over and sits down on Tommy’s other side. A wing snakes up against their backs.

“Does he really hate me that much?” Tommy whispers. “To - to want to die?”

“No,” Techno immediately replies. There’s a mirrored haze filming his eyes, some ruined backstage scene on replay.

“I think he thought he was doing what was best for us,” Phil says. Tommy makes a broken noise of protest, muffled in its inability to pursue anything but its own late remorse.

“Even if he’s still - wherever he is,” he says. “We’re still gonna look for him. Right?”

“Yes,” Phil says. The pressure lessens, just a bit, a brief respite of understanding. At the very least, despite all his failures, he can still promise this. “Yes, I - always. We’re not giving up.”

Techno nods, and stands up. He almost appears gliding as he moves to the door and presses an ear against the chilled grain.

“Blizzard’s lessened a bit,” he says. “Phil, do you-”

“Yes,” Phil says again. Tommy presses closer into the crook of his wing, fingers scrabbling.

“We’ll find him,” Techno says. A hand rests itself on the door’s handle, ready to slide the lock out.

“We’ll find Wilbur,” Phil repeats. “In whatever state he’s in.”

~\*~

Everything is cold. The strain of coldness that permeates beyond the skin and muscles and bone and seeps itself into the very fabric of the soul. The coldness that Wilbur would confront - no, be confronted by - with the questions of ancient, powerful spirits never connected to the conscience plane.

A dead mind, some might call it. Life’s parallel. Life’s paradox. To Wilbur it is a leash and it is a sentence, of breaths choked and never let go. A splint in the alignment of his being he can never right again.

Existences that were never meant to be, and yet are. Why would the world permit such atrocity?

The world is not kind, Wilbur learned long ago. It is not cruel, either, but indifferent.

That is the cruelest truth of them all.

And so he dreams, and the lull of existence seeps its coldness into him once again.

~\*~

“Who are you, mystery person?” There was something familiar about that poof of hair and angled face, like a wanted poster tugging from the coattails of his memory. Scott could have sworn he’s seen him somewhere before, but not in person.

The notion is rather ridiculous, however, so he shelves the thought for later and pours a few more drops of regeneration potion into the mug half full of warm milk before him.

*This person better be grateful*, Scott thinks as he tips the mug against the pale body’s lips, still cold despite having been in the warmth of his house for 3 hours. Healing potions are only getting more expensive by the day, with all the wars various nations have been waging lately.

He should be grateful their little town hasn’t been accosted to fight on behalf of some surrounding cause, but Scott thinks that not having their independence torn to shreds is an extremely low bar. And either way...

His fingers tighten into a fist, brief and reassuring. Either way, they have their methods.

It doesn’t change the fact that there is a man in a thin, ragged coat and the blue pale of almost gone, barely breathing on Scott’s feather mattress. Whatever had happened back there with golden shimmer was magic, death cheated in a way he’s just the slightest bit familiar with.

A Totem of Undying, Scott decides after consulting a few books that hum with latent warnings. He’s aware of the concept - but it answers one question in a sea of many.

Why was this man on the mountain in the middle of a blizzard, much higher than any place Scott has ever dared venture to? Was he taking a midnight stroll under clear skies before the storm suddenly hit as well?



But why was he *so* high up? How did he even get there? *Why?*

Was his fall some unlucky accident? All logic points to such, with the totem as a factor, but something about his too gaunt limbs and haunted expression tells Scott there was more to the story.

Much, much more.

And he can't *get* any of it until he wakes up!

Scott sighs, as, after a few moments, only a few drops of milk have been swallowed if at all. As though the body is subconsciously rejecting any form of life Scott is trying to coax into it.

Well, that's annoying. Unfortunately, the swallow reflex is not terribly strong with this one.

But fortunately, while he's nice, he's not *that* nice.

Scott pries the jaws open and tilts the mug again, dribbling a few drops of milk onto the tongue.

The only response is a twitchy shudder, before the mystery guest returns to his still, nearly lifeless form.

Well, a totem will have that effect.

A few more drops of milk, and Scott sets the mug back onto the bedside table. His bedroom is annoyingly small for a medical operation, he notes, carefully moving a few used bandages into the trash can. There are numerous bloody towels crowding a corner, and the smell of antiseptic alcohol reeks with a sting that makes Scott wish he's underwater again. Boards of wood lay scattered, smeared with blood in his numerous unsuccessful attempts to make proper splints.

Now, the person before him is half covered in bandages, has a leg and an arm splinted, and has taken a significant chunk out of Scott's potion supply.

And Scott's not even the certified doctor around here.

He checks the time again, numbers outlined in glowing redstone powder.

6 hours until dawn, roughly. And hopefully, the blizzard will have fully died down by then.

His head hits the table with a tired groan as he realizes he'll have to help shovel the ridiculously massive quantities of snow, or Lizzie will hound him about "community participation" again.

Scott's really not getting paid enough for any of this.

## Chapter End Notes

Was gonna update later but I got some stuff wrapped up early and decided to post in time for my birthday, lol.

(i reply to comments lives! [twitch](#)

[tumblr](#) and [twitter](#) for questions and art!)



# the worst of the calms

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Nothingness. For a stretch of bliss, Wilbur thinks he has achieved that elusive state of nothingness.

And then, it is all shattered.

When the world drags him forth, he resists, claws his soul across the empty space between stars and flounders into the deepest recesses of denial he can find. But alas, the fruits of his labor bear *nothing*.

“Dear gods, you really are a problematic one,” someone says. The voice unfamiliar, leveled with slight irritation.

“No,” Wilbur gasps with a tiny, pathetic sound, his first words to the world he’s been thrust back into.

Gold glitters at the edge of his vision. His chest is still too cold, too dark, his heart a tempo steady to the point of unnaturalness. Like some artificial metronome has wound its strings through the chambers.

“Wow, he’s a denier too,” the voice says.

Well, Wilbur won’t deny *that*.

But there’s what he has to deny - this thumping in his chest, the heat that burns against his skin like the edge of trailing fire.

He’s alive. He’s *fucking alive*.

The curtain flutters invitingly, the waters still and peaceful. Wilbur calls back to them, yearning. The depths are beauty and grace and everything he’ll ever wish for. They lap in waves, humming.

Then the world shifts beneath him, soft furs and the scent of cinnamon candles. With a jolt, his sanctuary falls away.

And he’s left with blankets. Pillows. And - with a shift, he realizes. His left leg and arm are both in casts, fingers bound in cocoons. Just enough to prevent their movement.

Everything just enough to prevent his ending.

The universe is probably laughing.

“Who are you?” Wilbur asks instead, despite how his vision is an endless black and the familiar pressure of bandages winds around his body.

So he fell with the intent of death and instead came back even less than before. A twisted, withering poppy now stripped of all petals.

“The person you should be thanking for saving your life,” comes the reply.

*No thanks*, Wilbur thinks. For a moment he considers if he should pursue that path of antagonization - but then again, does it really matter?

*He wants to die.*

That had been the entire point. His symphony ended, the conductor no longer welcome.

Though the warmth of soft blankets and a shuffling stranger tethers those thoughts against a jagged spire. Like Andromeda chained, awaiting destruction at an unknown beast.

“You’re going to pay me for this, aren’t you?”

Wilbur remains silent.

A sigh, and then, a damp cloth scrapes across his face. He feels his eyes wince, furrowing in complaint at the scrubbing that intensifies further before drawing away.

Slowly, the darkness of his vision is chased away in hazy mists. Above him is a man with light eyes and pink hair a shade softer than Techno’s.

Wilbur doesn’t recognize him. A true stranger, then, though the fact that he’s alive speaks magnitudes.

“I’m Scott,” the stranger says. “The reason you’re alive.”

“No thanks,” he croaks aloud this time. His throat burns, but at least that’s nothing new. “Shouldn’t have.”

“Oh great.” Scott’s face twists in a way not unlike Tommy’s when he’s assigned what he considers a particularly unpleasant task. “So that *was* a suicide attempt. I really didn’t sign up for this.”

“Bad thing to say to suicidal people,” Wilbur whispers. His words grate like steel wool inside his head, sandpapered down to a scratchy, broken record.

Though, what does he care for a world like this?

And he’s in no position to be lecturing strangers.

“You’re not trying to kill yourself again, right?” Scott asks. “I don’t need more people to question my doctoring skills.”

A sear of annoyance slices down Wilbur’s throat. It catches him by surprise and he swallows, involuntarily. Why couldn’t people just *leave him alone*?

All he wants is peace. Is that so difficult to ask for?

“I’ll wait ‘til I’m away, then,” he says. “Do you have a knife to spare, or need I find a river?”

His “rescuer” makes a noise like an offended cat denied its favorite spot. Or Tommy, denied another request.

The thought of Tommy sours everything again. Tommy shouldn’t have to deal with any of this. He should be moving on from Wilbur, from L’Manberg.

But Wilbur knows he isn’t. Not with the certainty of his death muddled as oily swampwater.

A quick shift confirms the obvious - limbs bound to a prison of bandages, where duty guards and expectation lays barbed wire against every escape.

The stranger - Scott. He's talking again. Questions or concerns, or more gripes. Wilbur lost the will to care a long time ago.

He closes his eyes. Drowns out the clamor of bright sights and smells. The taste of fresh baked bread still wavers through his senses.

The coldness is dissipating. His heart slams, each more erratic than the last.

The idea terrifies him.

The cold is calming. Familiar. *A finale.*

But he's alive. In the warmth of living, down to suffering its consequences. Where the dust of explosions scratch his lungs and the clattering of swords ring in his nightmares. He's been denied once, twice, thrice, will be again.

When did death become such a sisyphian effort?

~\*~

The weirdo's fallen asleep on him again.

Scott sighs, and drags a hand across fluffy hair. It catches in tangled curls, like usual. He should find a better way to occupy his fingers.

"Well, I'm not a doctor, and I'm not a therapist," he says. "Though I guess people do dump all their emotional problems on me around here."

Because, well - they don't *have* a therapist. It's a rare enough job, despite how strangely old the concept of having someone help weather mental health issues is.

"At least I have an excuse to stay here." Scott slices down the piece of bread before him and reaches for a nearby jar of strawberry jam. He would have liked some coffee to cope too, but his supply ran out a few days ago and it will be another month before the first traders reach their port.

It's small moments like these that make him regret settling down in such a northern outpost. Just for a few moments.

At least the rest of the town agreed to let him stay inside.

*"What if he wakes up and no one's there?" Pete reasons in the face of Lizzie's disgruntled expression.*

*"Fine, fine."*

So, no clearing snow like everyone else! On the other hand, Scott's not quite sure he'd rather babysit a suicidal idiot.

Best not say that to anyone's face. Suicide's no joking matter - but still.

He groans, and tries to not think too hard about it.

By the time Scott's finished his breakfast and the mug has only a few black tea leaves pooling at the bottom, his "patient" is stirring again. Hopefully, this time he can actually hold a conversation. One with *answers*.

"What's your name?" he asks when the eyes flutter open again. A dark, swirling brown that Scott thinks was likely, once upon a time, far, far brighter.

His guest is quiet for a long while.

Scott pours himself another mug of tea and spoons a dollop of honey into the steaming liquid. Quills and papers are brushed aside or filed away in the drawers below, and he takes out a small box of puzzle pieces in their place.

"Will," his guest says when the puzzle's halfway done.

"Oh, finally!" Scott grins. "Is your mind clear enough to remember my name, or should I draw it onto your face?"

The name tugs at that feeling once again, of knowledge squirreled away in shadows just out of reach.

"I don't care," Will says. He closes his eyes again.

"*Should be dead*," he mutters, just loud enough for them both to hear.

"Well, no one *should* be dead," Scott says mildly. "That's not for anyone to decide."

Not to say people's lives wouldn't be better if *certain* people died, but he refrains from that particular comment. Such a pinnacle of self-constraint, he is.

More moments drag by. Scott takes another sip of his tea.

"Not even ourselves?" Will eventually asks. It's a question to himself, more than anything.

Clearly, he has serious issues from his past. Scott feels a twinge of empathy - whatever Will has going on, it certainly can't be pretty.

"Look, it's not my place to tell you what to do with yourself," he says. "But in my experience most people are better off to others alive than dead. Do you have family or something?"

"I don-" Will's expression twists. Horrified pain flashes, clearly, for a split second.

"So you do," Scott says. And really, he should be taking this far more seriously. But he's not prepared for this and neither is Will, so that makes two of them.

"I shouldn't," Will says.

"What did they do to you?"

"No, not - it wasn't them." Misery wallows from his tone like a rising lagoon. "It's all my fault. I - they shouldn't have to deal with me."

"So *you're* deciding things for them?"

Will remains silent.

Scott shrugs, and unwraps some more bread.

“Feeling up for breakfast?”

“No.”

“Too bad.”

He cuts a small, soft piece and smooths a bit of jam on it. Then he takes a spare fork and carefully brings it to Wil’s lips.

“Eat. Before people start accusing me of willfully neglecting a patient.”

With clear reluctance, Will bites. Chews. And swallows.

“Good,” Scott says. “I don’t have golden apples and you’ve gone through enough of my potions, so you’ll have to settle for normal food like the rest of us.”

“Sure,” Will mutters.

Scott shoves another piece of bread in his face.

~\*~

“What do we say to him?”

Techno and Phil both still at his question. Tommy peers into their expressions - Techno, nerve-stricken with his lips half parted. Phil, eyes wide with anxiety. Both, brimming with guilt and dread.

He wonders how his own must look. For now Tommy settles on the floor of emotions that are just the same. With some indignance, maybe, now that there’s time for the initial shock to settle.

He shouldn’t be mad at Wilbur. He *shouldn’t*. Mental health is a bitch and he’s not the one who tried (and maybe succeeded, though that can’t really be true, it can’t) to commit suicide.

But still. Even after everything, Wilbur’s still - making things difficult. Making Tommy’s own recovery more difficult.

*He shouldn’t be thinking this.*

“What do I say to him?” he whispers.

“We - we care.” Phil says, eyes glazed. He must be lost so deep, Tommy thinks. “He matters. I... I would ask what I did wrong.”

“That I’m sorry,” Techno says quietly.

Tommy looks down, at the snow that’s white and scattered with gleaming flecks in the dawning light. The moon is sinking and the sun is rising and nothing is certain. They’ve been searching for... he doesn’t know how long. Since the weather allowed them. It feels like time passes in meaningless lurches, only with the empty spaces of white they turn up.

Wilbur is his fault. Is their fault. But...

“Would he say he’s sorry back?” Tommy mutters in a few threads of air, so soft even he can’t register words from the sounds

“What?”

“Nothing.” He shouldn’t be thinking like this. Or maybe he should, the *more* he thinks about it. Not that he can ever voice the thoughts, because nothing like that is worth voicing if Wilbur would grab onto it for further excuses.

That Wilbur should be sorry back. That he has to - well, it’s clear they all have to fix themselves. Tommy knows their family is one fuckload of problems after another. But they’ve tried so hard and Wilbur has... well, he doesn’t know what Wilbur has done.

Tommy still doesn’t know *anything* about what went on in Wilbur’s mind, on those long, saline nights when he could close his eyes and pretend everything is normal and safe and the wars never happened.

“How are we going to convince him to - to not - you know.” He makes a vague gesture and kicks at another snowdrift.

“To not jump off a cliff again?”

Phil flinches at Techno’s words. Tommy simply stares, and thinks, *yeah. That’s about right.*

“We need to say things like they are, Phil,” Techno says. “I think upfrontness is what’s goin’ to get us past this. And Wilbur knows - he just needs to agree to cooperate.”

“Cooperate,” Phil echoes. His feathers bristle up in unease.

“Yeah,” Tommy somehow finds it within himself to drawl. “Look, Phil-”

And Phil flinches, despite how Tommy has called him that for 2 years.

3 hours ago Tommy would have felt awful for it. Now he feels *vindicated*.

“-clearly we’ve all fucked up big time. Something has to change with Wilbur. You in or not?”

Phil closes his eyes.

“Yes,” he says without hesitation. “Always. Since Wilbur begged me to kill him and I said no.”

“So now we find him.” Techno turns to the watercolor sky, dawn in full fledge at the eastern distance.

“You have a hunch,” Phil says. They all know it’s not a question.

Techno points at the sprawling cluster of brown and black in the distance. The air’s clear enough to make out people, spotted splashes of color wading amongst the snow.

“Great, social interaction,” Tommy says. “Your favorite, right Techno?”

“It’s a logical conclusion, despite my... grievances.”

Phil brushes out his wings and angles the edges up.

“That’s - we should have realized sooner,” he says. “Either way, we need to check. Preferably soon.”



“Fucking now,” Tommy says. He stamps down the rising fear with an internal scowl and forces even breaths between shaking teeth.

“Fucking now,” Phil agrees.

~\*~

“So he’s finally awake?”

“Don’t crowd him, Lizzie.”

“I don’t care,” Wilbur says. Another lie. That seems about all he can do nowadays. Like a pendulum swinging between fading and fabrication.

“I’m Lizzie,” the new person says, sitting down on another chair Scott has pulled into the room. It’s a silvery wood, some species of larch that doesn’t grow on this continent.

Wilbur has been pulled up to her eye level, back propped by pillows. Falling asleep is now an exponentially more difficult challenge.

“His name is Will,” Scott provides when Wilbur doesn’t answer.

“So Will, what were you doing on the mountains that late at night?” Lizzie asks.

Wilbur turns the question over in his mind, reluctantly pulling at the cracks. Grasps for something simple to slot in.

“Dying,” he settles on.

Speaking of which. Another shift, but moving remains a fruitless endeavor. The universe denies yet again.

Lizzie’s mouth forms an “o” for a few seconds, before she snaps her gaze away to blink back at Scott.

Scott shrugs, in a clear case of “*What do you want me to do?*” It’s funny, how Wilbur can still read people like this, even after everything. Indifference and death as two circling planets on the path of unattainable desire.

“Okay,” Lizzie says. “He’s got me there, Scott.”

“Do I at least get insured for the potions I used on him?” Scott asks. “Isn’t it, like, a *town* policy to not let random strangers bleed to death if we can help it?”

“I’ll ask Shubble if we can figure something out,” Lizzie sighs. “Have fun with him, Scott.”

“Wait, when did he become *my* responsibility?”

*Didn’t ask you to take me, did I?* Wilbur thinks bitterly.

“When-”

“Relax, Scott, he’s not just your responsibility.”

Someone new is standing at the doorway to Scott's room. Brown hair with tints of gray, blue eyes the texture of opals. Expression carefully neutral.

"I came to make sure this situation is cleared up before Shubble gets too much of a headache," she adds, raising an eyebrow at Lizzie. "You won't run out of potions, Scott."

"Great," Wilbur grits out. "Now if you'll just let me leave--"

"--and you're not leaving until some questions are answered," the woman says. "By the way, I'm Pearl, the closest we have to a judicial authority around here."

Judiciaries. Great.

Well, maybe there's some half-truths in that one. After all, history fascinates - fascinated him. The way countries work. The way they fall. L'Manberg's central court system had been near non-existent, with war leaving no time to pull one together and Schlatt later considering himself the sole authority.

He wonders what rules this community operates by. It's small, he knows, having seen the territory at a distance and estimated population. A thousand people at most, probably closer to 800.

It's enough for a full fledged government, in most places. Mayors and judges and tax collectors and rolling parchments with laws inked in blood and strife. The black grimes of society that few dare gaze upon and fewer dare poke.

"So what is your name?" Pearl is suspicious. That's - not good. Wilbur knows his name and image is plastered across books and paintings, a curiosity for the world to see. A foolish revolutionary turned mindless madman. It will be a lot harder to die - to escape - if they realize who he is.

"Will," he says, too fast.

Pearl takes out a notebook, bound black leather and crinkled pages. She reaches across Scott's desk and drags back within reach a quill and ink pot.

The room suddenly feels smaller than before. A lot smaller. Suffocating. Wilbur chokes down the rising pace of his breaths and forces his eyes to unfocus.

"Lizzie, give us some room," Pearl says. A dismissal, and with a shrug Lizzie saunters out the door.

"So how did you *get* here?" There comes the first question.

"Be more specific," Wilbur says, because even now, in the face of strangers, at what's arguably an actual interrogation, at their *complete fucking mercy*, he'll *still* stalling. Coward to the end, but he accepted it once and he's not gone. How many times will he have to relent?

"Well, this mountain range surrounds us for hundreds of miles," Pearl says, leaning closer. "It's the middle of winter. The closest neighboring settlements are dozens of leagues away. Scott found you in the middle of the night with clothes barely fit for mid-spring around here. Something's not adding up."

Wilbur is silent. He calls for the curtains and it circles silently.

"Answer the question, Will," Pearl says, tapping his cheek with the end of the quill. The sliced edges grate like rough stone against his skin. "How did you get there?"

“I don’t owe you anything,” he says instead.

“Pearl, where do we store our torture devices?” Scott asks. Wilbur knows it’s a joke to the two of them, and a poor attempt at bluffing for him. But he laughs dully anyway, low and desperate. Both Pearl and Scott flinch at the cracked, crying sound.

“I’ve felt far worse than whatever torture methods any of you can come up with,” he says. “You could do just about anything to me and if I don’t want to talk, I won’t talk.”

Hence, the ocean. The endless waves of drawing quiet. The curtains, the respite, the way he can sink below it all. A most useful skill, in every such scenario.

“Well, *are* you going to answer the question?” Pearl asks.

To paint the picture complete is out of the question. Wilbur knows, and for the first time allows himself to ease back a singular layer. One of countless films.

He can’t reveal Phil. Or Tommy. Or Techno. Hopefully, they’ll finally get some peace and quiet without him.

Everything would be completely shattered if word got out that Technoblade, famed Blood God, is lurking around the mountains. That Philza, conqueror of the End, is with him. That Tommy Innit-

He wants to choke at the thought of Tommy. If Dream or Tubbo ever realize - no, they can’t, *they can’t-*

*And who’s stopping them if they do?*

The fire burns higher inside of him. Somehow his will of hate for it grows even stronger.

“A horse and stupid amounts of luck,” he says. Lets his eyes dull over. Masks stiffness with tones of annoyance. “The creature died a few days ago and I somehow survived longer.”

“Really,” Pearl says. She’s not - skeptical isn’t the right word, if only because it makes up only a part of her reaction.

“You’re definitely hiding something more,” Scott says. Experience ensures that Wilbur doesn’t show outward signs of change, but a bright bloom of panic flares within his chest.

*They can’t know.*

He shrugs.

“Where are you from?” Pearl asks. “A specific nation? Independent settlement?”

“The fuck if I know,” Wilbur says. *Play it calm. Play it safe.*

*You idiot, you choose now of all times to finally be careful?*

It’s technically true, at least - he grew up along the coastal cities of Pyserne, that continent which houses the likes of the Dream SMP, but it doesn’t mean he remembers which one. Any memory of biological parents has long since faded into hazy wisps of warm hands and soft whispers.

Phil is the only parent he’s ever had, absent as he was. Who didn’t abandon him, until he did.

*Or did he?*

No, he-

*You abandoned yourself. Phil tried to fly after you.*

Denial of that is impossible.

Pearl glances around, eyebrows furrowed. He sees the moment her eyes click, pupils darting inwards.

*Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck-*

“Scott,” she says. “Can we have a moment alone?”

Wilbur wants to tighten his grip on the blankets and rip them away. He wants to storm out that door and across the town and into the cold, icy ocean and smash his head bloody against the sea-shorn rocks.

But he is here, and he can’t leave.

“Sure. Have fun!” Scott closes the door on his way out, too fast and too eager.

“So,” Pearl says when the room is silent, save for a rhythmic scratching her quill and Wilbur’s labored breaths.

“Fuck off,” he grumbles. He sees her lips quirk up.

“Wilbur Soot.”

“What?” Despite the expectation, the name still twists his lungs all the same. He keeps his eyes away, on the puzzle Scott left nearly finished on the desk.

Just a piece left, barely incomplete. How unfair.

“That’s you, isn’t it?” Pearl asks. “Wilbur Soot.”

“No.”

Pearl’s eyebrows raise incredulously.

“I can pull up the drawings if you want.”

“Fuck off,” Wilbur says again.

“You know, there’s not much point denying it. And I have to tell at least the town council soon.”

*They know. They’ll all know.*

He can’t, people will come, they’ll find Tommy-

He was all self-denial, bright smiles. Repelling solutions like same-sided magnets. What changed?

*Accountability*, his mind scrounges up from its sludgy recesses. *Accountability.*

*He hasn’t paid his debts yet.*

*He had tried dying anyway.*

“And what will that do to this place?” Wilbur asks.

Pearl freezes.

“What?”

“Loose tongues, Pearl,” Wilbur says. “Do you really want L’Manberg or the Dream Kingdom to come knocking at your doorstep?”

She presses her lips in a thin line. The quill writes faster than before.

“I’ll take that into consideration,” she says, voice hard. “But it’s been 3 months since the Desolation of L’Manberg.”

“Not particularly desolate, last I heard.”

*Play your cards right.* It’s been so long since Wilbur willingly engaged in this game. But he has to.

Is that willingness? What choice has he left?

“What are you *doing* here?” Pearl asks, and there’s that tint of disbelief Wilbur expected. “Most people think you died. Blew yourself up.”

“That was the plan,” Wilbur says. “Then the cliff was the plan. My plans are so wonderfully reliable, as you can tell.”

Bitterness crawls out his mouth like maggots from a rotting carcass, and he allows it. Turn the subject. Draw the attention where it should be. What else? Anything but questions of Tommy.

“So you’re admitting you’re Wilbur Soot now?”

Wilbur shrugs.

“An entire ocean away,” Pearl repeats. “And with - Scott says you had a totem on you.”

He shrugs again, movement slow and stiff.

The totem. That explains it. It’s yet another time he’s underestimated Phil. The coldness explained, in half a puzzle.

Does Phil really want him alive that much? For what? He’s useless now, the least of all to himself.

“You said you’re the judicial authority,” Wilbur says, turning the line of thought away. He’s not ready to answer it yet, and will never be ready.

“Oh, sort of,” Pearl says. She bites the hook, eyes knowing. Wilbur supposes he should appreciate that. “I’m the one people call in to resolve disputes. Apparently, my lack of family around here makes me an ideal candidate.”

“Usually helps.”

“Won’t deny it,” she replies. “So I judge cases, and all that. Our judicial system isn’t terribly defined, beyond just asking me and sometimes the town council. There’s prosecution and defense if it’s serious

enough, but it rarely ever is.”

“And who leads the place?”

“We have the town council, as I mentioned,” Pearl says. “12 seats, all voted in. They make the laws and all that, though there’s not that much lawmaking to be had with a place like Sanctuary - that’s the town’s name, by the way. Things mostly just stay the same. Scott, Shubble, and me take turns representing us in relations or agreements with other places.”

It’s the opposite of L’Manberg, in structure. The same building blocks and an entirely different geometry. Granted, L’Manberg’s population probably numbers at around 60,000 even after all the wars, but still. It scales up, and up.

Until it doesn’t.

“You would know of successful nations, wouldn’t you?” Pearl asks, and there’s hesitance now.

“No,” he says shortly. “Nothing good in L’Manberg ever happened because of me.”

He makes a tiny motion with his tightly bound arm. It’s his left one, too.

Pearl watches him silently.

Wilbur doesn’t need to justify anything. But he somehow finds himself talking anyway.

“L’Manberg’s successes are now my failures,” he says. *Keep it on L’Manberg, on me.* “I intended for it to end that day. Have Dream absorb it all back, or whatever.”

“Well, I suppose in a way it did die,” Pearl says. “People have started calling it ‘New L’Manberg’ under the Tubbo administration. I think the name will stick.”

“Probably,” Wilbur says. “They want to cut it all off from me. I feel the same way.”

*His symphony.*

When the rain is over and quiet comes like death whispering softly - but it passes by as well with a soft twirl and leaves him still waiting in clouds and sunlight - what does he do?

*What does it matter?*

*My L’Manberg.*

*Their L’Manberg.*

“Special place,” he murmurs, and thinks of governments. Of the fairness of courts and manmade systems. Successes and failures. They’re all so relative.

“And they trust you as the sole judicial authority?”

“Well, if enough people think I’m doing a bad job, they can just chase me out,” Pearl says. “We pretty much all know each other. I imagine it’s much harder with a full fledged nation.”

“But familiarity isn’t a thing we can just have,” Wilbur says. “It’s why we have judicial systems in the first place.”

Or watch it all crumble apart, like L'Manberg did.

He's not living in a nation anymore. It's a lawless land, with his family, who've always disregarded such things as minor nuisances.

"Well-

"Pearl, we have more visitors!" Scott's muffled voice sounds from the door. "Three of them. I think they're looking for Will."

*Fuck.*

They can't, they can't, why would they come here-

Pearl shoots him a questioning look. Wilbur flattens his expression to the exact same as before. Always the actor.

His family is here. They're going to confront him. He'll have to explain.

And whereas before there was the guaranteed release of the cliffs, here he has nothing. Nothing but bandages and lies, and the mockery of a system that works.

Everyone will be watching. Their cover is blown. Wilbur's failed, yet again, on so many levels.

There's nowhere to hide now, in this tiny, suffocating room with a Pearl that's standing up and walking over to the door. Nowhere to hide from Phil's pain, Techno's distress, Tommy's ever-increasing well of disappointment that will only flood further with the realization of what Wilbur's done.

They can't know. No one can know. They were supposed to be safe, to be *away*. Away from the wreckage of everything he's created.

*Why did he leave them. Why isn't he better. Why hasn't anything worked. Why does he make things so difficult. Why. Why. Why.*

*Why.*

He can't breath but he must. He can't think but he must. He can't hide but he must. Forever a paradox.

*Can't.*

*But he must.*

## Chapter End Notes

Writing Wilbur's name as "Will" is a truly cursed experience. Never again.

([discord](#) to get pings for updates/discuss stuff!

i reply to comments lives! [twitch](#)

[tumblr](#) and [twitter](#) for questions and art!)

It's been a very tiring week, hence why I had originally planned to extend the break to early March. Wanted to get this chapter out on Thursday, but got really distracted with other stuff (uhh check out [this](#) fic I wrote of everyone responding to Tommy's death, which aged *extremely* ~~poorly~~ well). Then I was very busy the entirety of Friday so here we go.



# so this is not an act of spite, it's a visceral coming to

## Chapter Notes

[discord](#) to get pings for updates/discuss stuff!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Beneath Phil's cloak, his wings are ruffling. The town is too warm, people too many, all milling about and eyeing them with that usual combination of wariness and curiosity.

Tommy walks next to him with an apprehension he hasn't carried since their first night on the mountains. His hood is pulled up, coat heavy. Sleeves covering the grave of scars that cross his arms. A small frown presses against his lips, so painfully different from the bright eyed boy who had left Phil's house with Wilbur just a few years ago.

Techno follows behind them, blue hood shadowing even his eyes. The rest of the sky-colored cloak trails faint furrows in the snow, white trim distinguishable only by their furred shape and faint gray tips.

They've agreed to have him stay quiet unless necessary. As much as Phil hates it, Techno's the biggest giveaway that they're not just a normal band of people.

If Wilbur's around, they might have already recognized him. If they recognize Techno as well, their entire progress might be lost.

Phil will fight and kill Dream himself if he has to, but any pretense of peace will be completely shattered. After so long, the prospect of moving again is an extremely unwelcome one.

"We're looking for someone," Phil says when the first person breaks away from the group to meet them. Her hair is an amaranth pink and her cheeks dusted red from the chill.

"Someone grumpy as hell, very suicidal?" she asks. "Hair looks like an owl nest?"

Oh, fuck.

Tommy stifles a gasp. Phil barely keeps himself from collapsing, knees suddenly feeling as though the words had burned holes through them.

"Looks like it. He calls himself Will," the woman continues. "Scott said he found him last night when he was collecting rocks up on the mountain."

"Where is he?" Phil ploughs forward a few more steps. The desperation leaks through clear as crawling black tar in the sunlight, but he doesn't care.

Wilbur's here. Wilbur's alive and he hasn't failed yet-

"Scott's house. He and Pearl are asking him questions." She pauses, eyeing them up and down. "I imagine they'll want you three to answer some too."

Tommy looks about ready to lunge forward and demand directions outright, but she points at a house last second and Phil pulls him away.

He can hear Techno's footsteps blasting through powdery snow that's yet to be cleared. The urgency screams a rawness bloodier than any battlefield.

The man who answers the door doesn't show a hint of surprise when Tommy immediately demands to see Wilbur. Instead, he simply beckons them inside with a slight huff.

*"Looking for Will,"* Phil hears after he enters another room, and the muffled reply of someone else.

Neither Techno nor Tommy bother waiting - instead, they both race over and the door slams open with a crack louder than lightning.

Without hesitation, Phil darts over to join them.

~\*~

Scott excuses himself as soon as possible and drags a startled looking Pearl out with him, looking more uncomfortable than Wilbur thought possible on him.

Is that what worms uneasiness beneath his skin, then? Not any of Wilbur's deadened responses or low-key threats, but instead the promise of an actual conversation with true stakes?

*Coward*, Wilbur can't help but think, but he's long lost all right to talk of cowardice.

At least he's facing them upright, back propped against the lacquered cherry headboard. His right hand, mostly bandage free, claws up the blankets like they'll provide any kind of shield for the storm to come.

The ocean is no longer calm. It's drawing back. It's preparing for the hurricane.

"Wil," Techno says when they're both in sight of each other. It's a single syllable, ends feathering so nicely in its tremors.

Wilbur looks down. The blanket is a threaded quilt of soft red yarns, bright pink snowflakes patterning across it. He picks at one, trying and failing to unfocus his eyes.

"Wilbur," Phil says softly. "We - we're not mad, if you-"

"You're not." Tommy cuts. "I *very* much fucking am." His voice tightens around the words, a hard wall of sound. It dams a torrent of vehemence.

So this is how it finally comes together. In bandages weak as Wilbur's backbone, cowering at the mercy of his regrets.

"I know," he finally says. "I know, Tommy."

After all, Tommy's biggest strength, and weakness, has always been his loyalty.

He never abandoned Wilbur. But Wilbur abandoned him.

“You’re a fucking bitch.” Tommy’s shaking. He’s shaking so hard his hands are clutching the headboard of the bed and Wilbur can feel each tiny vibration snaking through himself. “You stupid coward.”

“Tommy,” Phil says, eyes wide. “Don’t-”

“No,” Wilbur rasps. His throat is dry again. “He’s right. I’m a stupid coward.”

“Damn right.” Tommy closes his eyes. And suddenly, his arms are around Wilbur, and warm tears are soaking the matted cotton of his shirt.

*Oh.*

The pale tips of Tommy’s hair peak like mountain skylines in his vision. Phil stands with an expression of frozen shock behind the veil, wings fluttering to some invisible circular rhythm.

“You idiot,” Tommy whispers against his chest.

Does - does Tommy miss him that much?

“Wilbur,” Techno says, taking a step closer. “Wilbur, what did I - *why?*”

The Antarctic blue looks nice on him. He seems secure in it, gold chains lining down the side and silver neck clasp set against the white wool undershirt. There’s no weapon, no mask, and the only red is reflected in his eyes. A crimson now less like blood and more like polished rubies.

“I’m a stupid coward,” Wilbur repeats, but he can’t loop the words forever. Tommy clenches his shirt closer, a stiffening reminder of all he owes them.

“I wanted my life to end,” he continues.

Tommy sucks in a breath.

Wilbur stills. *The truth.*

“I wanted my problems to end.”

Phil staggers forward and nearly collapses onto him as well, holding himself back by a hand while the other presses against Wilbur’s face. Calloused fingers brush down his cheek.

Oh. Is he crying? The last rags of that curtain still clinging desperately to the illusion?

It’s far too late for that.

“Wilbur,” Phil says, voice pulled thinner than spider silk. Just as fragile, spinning in the sunlight. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

Not Phil’s fault. Not Techno’s fault. Never Tommy’s fault-

So it’s all his. And he tried to run. And he’s still running.

“Me too,” Wilbur says. Because he’s the only one who should have been giving apologies today.

What is he apologizing for, really?

Tommy is crying. Phil is crying. Techno is pale and anxious, hovering at the edge of falling uncertainty. Where words fly and dance in maddening circles around the tips of admittance.

He's ruined everything again. It wasn't supposed to end up like this.

*"My plans are so wonderfully reliable, as you can tell."*

"Fuck," he mutters into the nothingness. "Fuck."

Except it's not nothing anymore.

"Why?" Tommy's scrabbling for any ground, breaths tiny. "Why, Wilbur? We were - things were fucking pog and you just - you *left*."

Wilbur glances up at Phil, whose wings are still quivering and who's clutching Wilbur's free hand like it holds all the precious answers in the world.

Techno blinks at him when their eyes meet, both wide like spheres and filled with doubt. He glances at Phil, and then Tommy, and back at Wilbur again. There's no accusation, which is what Wilbur deserves and far, far more as well, but there's... expectancy. Reliance.

*There wasn't anything left to stay for.*

The words flutter at the tip of his tongue, so easy. *So expected*. Just a tiny breath to flutter the denial into existence, blank and bare before his family. Slice that last chain into a million clattering pieces, never to be reforged again.

But Tommy's grip digs sharp hooks into his heart, the chambers bleeding red and echoing with the grief of it all. Tears pour in to flood the cracks, salt the layers.

It hurts. Suddenly, everything hurts. It's a burn that cuts serrated lines through every fiber of his being and loops itself as a noose that's choking all the pathetic life out his throat and it has to stop and *why is it happening?*

*Stop*, Wilbur wants to wail. Is his head splitting again? Is this what punishment feels like? The retribution he deserves? Finally delivered through stabbing, fiery heartache?

*Stop.*

*I can't.*

*It's too much.*

His fingers want to curl down and scratch and slash it all out in a ragged, rupturous mess of bones and guilt and he won't care but the bindings they mock him and punish him-

"Wilbur!"

*"I'm sorry."*

They're all staring and oh fucking gods he's truly sunk to the lowest of the low with his inability to accept anything for what it is and give anything in return with acknowledgement as well what is he doing-

*“Wilbur!”*

“I can’t,” he sobs, because this is the whimpering creature he’s reduced himself to. “I’m sorry, *I can’t.*”

“But why?”

Tommy’s voice shoots a trail of fire through the emptiness of his thoughts. It’s a flare brighter than the festival, than explosions tearing gaping swathes of scars across L’Manberg and making it a mud-soaked rag of a nation, a performance that was always destined to careen in flaming disaster.

He can’t. That is it. He can’t and Tommy - Tommy wants an answer. No, *the* answer. Wasn’t there once upon a time, when Wilbur would have done anything to provide it to him?

“I don’t want to move on,” Wilbur gasps. “I don’t, I’m sorry, it *hurts.*”

*Everything hurts.*

L’Manberg and Fundy and Tubbo and Schlatt and Dream’s promising smile of a mask that pinned him down and steered him lurching onto the path of corruption.

But the choice was always Wilbur’s. *His* L’Manberg, *his* nation, *his* office of power.

The way he found tears soaking his pillow every night during the war, how they only rose in volume afterwards, in those months when the food costs climbed and dissension increased with every failed treaty.

And - and Tommy hurts and Techno hurts and the shape of Phil’s absence devours inside Wilbur a deeper and deeper hole every time he closes his eyes and grows weaker against the calls of the void.

The regrets, they’re all still here. Howling in furious torment and craving closure in every conscious moment Wilbur continues to accept into his being.

He left it all. He came with Phil. He tried to help. He thought it would work.

*It didn’t.*

*Everything still hurts.*

“I can’t do anything,” he says. “I can’t. It doesn’t work.”

“Wilbur, Wilbur it does-”

“*Phil-*” Wilbur chokes down the next few words.

Silence.

And isn’t that just so familiar?

“I - I can’t. Move on. I try and I can’t. I’m *useless* now, but you all-”

“Wilbur,” Tommy says. The grip lessens, but the words do not, and that is what matters in the end. “You have to keep trying.”

“It’s too much,” Wilbur repeats, like the broken record he is. He’s given up trying.

“You should have talked to us.” Phil is pressed against him, arm wrapped around his shoulders like guardrails. When did it happen? Does it matter?

Yes, is the answer.

Because this time, he can’t tear the railings down.

“I can’t. Talk.” And Wilbur doesn’t know to what he’s answering for anymore. Futile justification of his previous actions? His family’s pleas for him to rip the curtains apart and finally admit his true self?

“You *couldn’t*,” Techno says. Wilbur blinks, and long pink hair sways in front of him.

He’s scared, Wilbur realizes. Techno is scared, fingers dancing invisible patterns at his side, expression set tense as the words he spoke, slow and forced through a mesh of cold, sharp iron.

“You couldn’t, but you can now. What did - what did we do wrong, Wilbur?”

“Nothing,” Wilbur whispers. “Nothing. Nothing at all, I’m just-”

He lets out a dull laugh, some stripped rendition of his echoes in Pogtopia. All passion washed out by defeat. Tommy’s eyes widen, but he doesn’t pull away.

“I did everything wrong,” he says. “And I can’t fix it. So I want to leave. It wasn’t - it wasn’t any of your faults.”

The words grate through his throat in a floundering march, the tempo never decided, and Wilbur registers their meaning only after they were out for his family to hear.

About time, then. There’s still such a long way to go.

But Wilbur doesn’t want to go down that path. It’s mist and mirrors and reflections exposed. The dark shape of every choice grasping tendrils around his heart.

He’s scared.

He’s so scared.

“But it - I didn’t - I should have *known*.” Phil sounds so distressed.

A stray downy feather flutters down Wilbur’s vision and he finds himself plucking it out of the air. A black omen. Faint wind rustles against him.

“We can never know everything, Phil,” Wilbur says. He would know, he wishes he doesn’t, but he *does* and it hurts so much all the time, the weight of his failures crushing down like the world on Atlas’ shoulders. “Sometimes our best just isn’t good enough.”

Atlas never had the choice to leave his position. But Wilbur did. Why wouldn’t he have taken it?

“You have no right to pretend to be all wise and shit,” Tommy says, glaring up. “You tried to fucking off yourself.”

“It wasn’t the first time,” Wilbur says, keeping his attention on the soft black fluff between his fingers.

“It better be the last.”

He has a feeling there won't be much choice in that. Judging by this conversation, they'll take turns guarding him every hour of the day if they have to.

And what does that say? That after everything, his family still hasn't let go of him?

“Why can't a man just fucking die in peace,” he exhales softly.

Everything still hurts.

The mountain of issues that lie between them all - the hurt, betrayal, the trauma, everything Wilbur's caused, crowned by a peak of melting denial. It looms steady, long shadows stretching ever further with the dusk of Wilbur's life. He doesn't know how they're able to see through any of it.

“You're not dying,” Phil says tightly. “Not for a long time.”

“Time is relative, Phil,” Wilbur responds. He leans up and glances at him. “You of all people should know this.”

Phil's eyes are still pooling tears like crystals, wings spread and begging to stretch the fabric of this universe.

“You're relative too,” Techno says. He sounds so hurt, like Wilbur has insulted an ability of his, implied he is no longer worthy of holding the titles he does.

...when did that happen? Why doesn't he know? Has he ruined something yet again?

A fire flares and burns, a sudden alarm inside his chest.

The problem with this situation, Wilbur realizes faintly, is that he's never getting another chance. He's forced to confront his failures, again and again. And yet he's still making mistakes.

Techno lowers himself, kneeling at Wilbur's eye level. He shouldn't be.

“To us, you can move on,” Techno says. “And we need you to move on for ourselves too, Wilbur.”

Wilbur's throat freezes. The pain crawls to numbness, and it's somehow even worse.

“You need to apologize and help us, you bitch,” Tommy adds, and the vindictiveness is back, rounded by a desperation he could almost mistake for love.

No, it can't be actual love, he's - he's beyond the point where anyone could actually love him. They need him accountable, they want him contributing, he has to-

“I have to,” he gasps, stilted, heaving with the necessity to say something, *anything*, any sort of admission.

Accountability, indeed. If this is - if this is what now tethers Wilbur to this mortal plane, the notion that his family wants him to bring closure, wants him to finally own up to everything and help them heal...

*“And we need you to move on for ourselves too, Wilbur.”*

Do they, though? Do they really? Is that a condolence for him, for them, or the truth of the matter he's refused to see since... since he first decided he would perish in a spectacle to match L'Manberg's?

If it is that, then it would be another failure to the mountain, a base that props up the charade Wilbur's been cultivating for so long.

It'll all come crumbling down eventually - no, it has already crumbled. And in another twisted irony of the universe, they're left standing amidst the rubble once again.

"I don't know what to fucking *do*." Wilbur closes his eyes, a mess of useless hopes dithering before them all. "Nothing works. So I tried to die and that didn't work either. I - I can't-"

"Just try," Phil says. The feather in Wilbur's hands burns a blur of lines, but he can't bring himself to let go. Instead, he clutches onto it like another fragile lifeline.

"I'm sorry," he manages. "For..."

For running away. For endangering them. For causing so much stress.

For being the source of their problems.

Because it all started with him. *His* L'Manberg, *his* stupid country, and what did it all matter, in the end?

Wilbur would raze L'Manberg to the ground all over again if it meant that they could restart. But he couldn't, and it wouldn't change anything at all.

He's so tired of trying to change the inevitable.

"For failing everything," he says. "I really - I really can't do anything right, can I?"

"Wilbur." A wing brushes down his cheek, movement so tender he wants to cry again. To bury himself in the curtain and never come back out.

"You're dealing with so much trauma too," Phil says.

"Trauma is inflicted by others." Wilbur shakes his head. Swallows down another plea for contact. "I'm - I'm filled with corruption. I don't have anyone to blame but myself."

"Fuck that," Tommy snaps, and Wilbur turns to stare. "You can have both, Wil. You're not hopeless, so stop being a bitch. I'm not letting you."

"Tommy, this whole thing was-" Wilbur breaks off and takes another deep, shuddering gasp.

He has to do this. No matter what happens, with Tommy in front of him, he has to admit this-

"-was my fault. Everything that happened to you. It was me. I'm so sorry, it was *me*, Tommy. I was the one dumb enough to make you help me. To challenge Dream. To fight in a revolution. To lead a nation. And now look where we are."

"We're fine," Techno says. "Or we will be. We're *safe*, Wilbur."

"Damn fucking right," Tommy says. Wilbur can't tear himself away from that fixed expression, still so familiar, still the same blaze of determination it seems nothing would be able to erase. "It's not-"



Tommy pauses, and his eyes unfocus for a silent moment.

“It’s not just you, Wilbur,” he whispers. “It’s others too. Schlatt, the green bitch. And you’re the one apologizing in front of me, not them.”

“You shouldn’t forgive me.” But Wilbur leans closer to Tommy, anyway. “I - some people don’t deserve forgiveness.”

“Wilbur, you’re my *brother*. I’m not gonna pretend the past 6 years we knew each other just never fucking happened, okay?”

Wilbur is still, is silent, but he is not dead. And he feels his chest burn with the fury of those words.

He wonders if that fire will ever stop burning, if Tommy is willing to rage for it forever.

“Just fucking try,” Tommy says. “Help us. Talk to us. Live. I - I’ll forgive you, Wilbur. Things will be fucking fine. *Just try.*”

“I...”

Does he have a choice?

*Yes, his mind provides. Always. Always a choice. Your choices led to your failures, after all.*

“Wilbur,” Phil says. “Please.”

And Techno nods.

And there’s so much more still left unsaid.

*Just try.*

“I’m sorry,” Wilbur murmurs, and wonders if he’ll ever stop saying it.

Phil makes a strangled noise.

“I’m sorry too,” he says.

“Techno.” Tommy reaches out and tugs at Techno’s hand. “Join the party.”

“I - I’m sorry,” Techno says. “There’s a lot to be sorry for, guys. We’ll be listin’ them all night. And fixin’ it for the rest of our lives.”

He’s the most uncomfortable out of all of them, everything so scattered from his usual domain. And yet he’s still handling it better than Wilbur.

A party, alright.

“If we must, then so be it,” Phil says.

And oh, he *could*. Because he always has a choice, and everything he’s ever done so far has proven it. His nation and revolution and decision to blow it all up. To leave it all behind.

The curtain of denial, parting.

His head hurts. His chest hurts. He wants it to end. He can make it end. Does he want it to end?

“I...”

“Wilbur.” Tommy’s tugging at his shirt again. “Are you gonna fucking help us or not?”

“I - I’ll try,” Wilbur says. Because he has no choice. Because he has a choice.

It’s so fucking confusing. He doesn’t know what any of it means anymore. Nothing fits together.

“Do you promise?”

A promise is binding, he knows. That Tommy will forever hold him accountable to it. That he can never let himself fail Tommy again.

Leaving them was supposed to help. Help them all. They would move on better without him. The final argument that convinced him to abscond from the consequences of everything. To sever the pain, guilt free.

Except the guilt is always there. It never went away.

They’re dragging him back and never letting him go. They want him to move on too. For themselves? Him? What indefinite combination of the two?

He has to, doesn’t he? What else is he supposed to do, now that all else has failed?

Suddenly, Wilbur’s struck with the realization that he doesn’t want to disappoint anymore. There’s no bottom to the low he can sink to. He doesn’t want to explore it any further. He wants out.

He wants out so badly. For it to end.

If the below is blocked, then what of the above?

“I promise,” Wilbur rasps, and in this finale every other escape is sealed shut.

## Chapter End Notes

eyy 55k words and they FINALLY start to get their shit together who decided it would take this long smh

(i reply to comments live, among other things. streams are rare though. [twitch](#)

[tumblr](#) and [twitter](#) for questions and art!)

if you like this fic then check out these fics, which are some other dsmg stuff of mine that’s *mostly* canon compliant: <https://archiveofourown.org/series/2203440/>

and heres a definitely not canon compliant au i started this week too - <https://archiveofourown.org/works/29969178>

if there was a playlist for this fic it would just be Wilbur's You City Gave Me Asthma album on repeat, at least for the first 17 chapter lmao. just listened to losing face on repeat the entire time i worked on this chapter

# let the valleys awake, let them rattle and shake

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The before of a storm is calm, but so is the after, even if only in relativity. And it is a calmness perhaps stranger than any other.

Wilbur lies shivering in Tommy and Phil's combined embraces, and Techno stands to the side, detached. Throat closed in its greatest moment of need.

But Wilbur has promised, and so for now they all bask in each others' presence. Techno lets the comfort wrap itself warmly around him, just this once.

"We should get back," Phil says finally. "This is still unfamiliar territory."

"Pearl - the woman who was with me," Wilbur says, in a way still honed by desperation. But it's directed better now, surely? "She recognized me. As Wilbur Soot. I tried to convince her I was the only one here but..."

*But now they're all here*, Techno thinks. There's no world where any of them will regret it, but it poses a problem nonetheless.

He clears his throat, sliding a bit closer to the door. The two others in this house are in the living room - which they had stayed in the entire time after they had left this conversation. Techno's almost impressed they didn't start eavesdropping even once.

"Let's start simple," he says. "We leave. If anyone tries to stop us, I stab them. If anyone tries to follow us, I stab them."

"Sounds good," Phil nods, standing up.

"Maybe a little less stabbing and a little more yelling first, Techno," Tommy laughs. It sounds more forced than usual - breaths too hard, endings too abrupt. Rusty iron catching the words.

Does Tommy care, then? Enough to minimize suffering? Techno's not sure whether or not to be proud.

"Sure, sure," he says, because he has to play along anyway. For Tommy. And yes, leaving a trail of death around is not the most efficient hiding strategy.

"Wilbur," Phil says. "Do you need me to carry you?"

Wilbur's eyes are unfocused again, fingers tapping to some lilting melody. Tommy reaches over and gives him a tiny shove.

"Ah - oh. What?"

"Wilbur," Phil says, softer. "Do you need me to carry you?"

"I..."

“It’s fine if you do,” Phil adds. “We just need to get back, and the sooner the better, okay?”

“Get back,” Wilbur echoes. “Right.”

He’s silent for another moment. Techno tries and fails to stay still, his shifting only growing more noticeable.

“Yeah,” Wilbur finally says, voice thick like molasses, the sounds condensing in on themselves like he tried to fold them back midway through.

A moment later, he tugs the quilted blanket off of himself.

Techno is no stranger to injury, and he can tell it will be weeks before Wilbur can even safely stand for long periods of time, let alone walk. The totem heals immediate causes of death, just enough to tangle death’s grasp - but no more.

The bones in both of his legs and feet must have shattered on the impact. It’ll take extremely precise realignment, potion application, and likely even surgery to heal right.

Techno’s seen such mangled damage before, and the aftermath - Wilbur might be left with a permanent limp. It leaves a deep, churning feeling inside his chest, that Wilbur could be left in such a disadvantage for the rest of his life. A limp is incredibly dangerous in close combat, and in terrain as precarious as the one they’ve settled the risk of accidents has just bolted up like an arrow.

Phil clearly realizes the same, stifling a distressed gasp even as Wilbur’s resigned expression hangs before them.

Tommy stays quiet, his bitten lips the only indication he understands. But he does.

“Let me carry Wilbur until we’re out of sight,” Techno says. “Phil, you should save your strength for flying him up.”

Phil nods, and steps back.

Wilbur is mostly warm, but the splotches of cold that do scatter his body is just made all the more apparent by it. The aftereffects of totem magic, slicing that forbidden barrier between life and death. He hangs limply in Techno’s arms like rags of spirit held together only by the thin string of promises.

On the outside, though, it’s all thin clothes and hasty bandages. Wood splints he’s careful not to jostle.

Something brushes against Techno’s elbow. He looks down to see Tommy heaving the blanket up to cover Wilbur’s frame.

“Gotta wrap him with something,” Tommy says. “Or he’s gonna get cold.”

“It’s not our blanket,” Phil says. “Plus, did you have to take the... the one with the pink snowflakes?”

“There’s nothing wrong with a pink and red color scheme,” Techno says. He quite likes the blanket, actually. It’s soft and warm and kept Wilbur alive through the night. What more could they ask for?

Tommy rolls his eyes and holds up a gold arm band. Or - wait. It’s one of the rings from his cloak, which itself had been crafted for the Antarctic Empire rulers and thus had initially dripped with far

more jewelry and royal crests. Techno had removed most of the identifying features and larger precious stones, but the gold rings remained simply for the nice color contrast.

Plus, it's nice to have more to intimidate people with. If not military power, then at least wealth, since no one has ever successfully robbed him or Phil before.

"This is real gold," Tommy says. When no one refutes him he continues, "anyway, it's more than enough for a blanket. Tell them to get a new one."

"That works," Phil says slowly. He moves over and pushes the bedroom door open fully.

They had that entire conversation in someone else's home. The realization is just sinking into Techno, and what does all of that say about them?

*Focus*, he thinks. Wilbur is still and silent in his arms again.

Firstly, they have to get back to their own home.

~\*~

Scott accepts the gold ring with a suspicious, if accepting shrug. Wilbur hears Phil take a moment to whisper threats of sworn secrecy in his and Pearl's ears before they're out the door.

There wasn't any need for it, really, not with the promise of foreign interference hanging over their heads that Wilbur himself unveiled. And if there's one thing he's still good at, it's threats.

A nice precaution, though, never hurts.

Everyone stares when they file out. Scott's blanket probably isn't helping. But with the fuzzy warmth of his surroundings, so different from the blaze that burns scars inside of him, Wilbur can't bring himself to resent it.

At first a few make hesitant moves, as though to apprehend them, but Phil and Tommy's glares keep them back long enough for Pearl to emerge and wave them clear as well.

The walk to the shallow edges of the mountains, just out of sight among swaying pines and rattling maples, is uneventful.

Wilbur's not sure if he hopes the course of his life will stay that way. Counting the days as they come, letting it all slip past. It's quiet and peaceful and what his family wants, isn't it? Maybe with the tranquility of the ocean lapping at the shores, ever present, ever predictable, it'll be bearable. Fine, even.

Maybe it'll be fine.

~\*~

So now it leads to this. With Wilbur staring at them from his bed-bound position, Tommy sprawled over his jukebox while *Cat* dances its notes away, and Techno somewhere in the vast world outside, having declared his intention to shoot something down for dinner.

"I'm sorry," Phil says, carding fingers through his own hair. He pauses, and then tugs the wires of gold that hug his wrist, pulling them further and further apart until they're loose enough to slip off.

They're so soft. Malleable. Preciously glittering. He handles the golden magic as carefully as he can.

"I know," Wilbur says, and doesn't protest when Phil gently wounds the strands around his right wrist. The only one of his limbs that's more bare skin than white cotton.

"We'll figure this out, okay?" Phil says. The words come slowly, dragging themselves out from the recesses of his guilt. But they have to be said and he never wants to be so disappointed in himself again.

"We'll figure it out," he repeats. "I'm sorry I was - that I wasn't there before. You shouldn't have had to deal with any of this."

"I chose to build L'Manberg, Phil," Wilbur says. "And I chose to leave it. And then I chose... this."

The implications, the parallels - they're not lost on Phil.

"We've all made bad choices," Phil says. "I - it all started with me, really."

How he should have been there, instead of playing emperor with Techno. Instead of marveling at the world's natural landscapes, because nothing will ever be as beautiful as the sight of his children *alive*.

Wilbur doesn't respond, closing his eyes.

Behind Phil, the door opens, and Techno's boots make their muffled stomps at the doorway.

"Got dinner," he says. "Hope you all like goose. Also, some of the fish in the pond died recently so I took those too."

"Are you sure that's fucking safe to eat?" Tommy asks, glancing up. Techno shrugs.

"They're tiny. I'll roast them over the fire as a snack for myself or something."

Tommy scoffs, but presses his face back against the jukebox.

Phil holds Wilbur's hands for a few more seconds before moving over.

"Welcome home," he says, and hopes they know he means it to all of them.

~\*~

"You think we should start... expanding in other ways?" Techno asks. The wind chooses this moment to slash another howl against their door, the noise audible even down here. Phil reminds himself to find a stronger locking mechanism at the village sometime.

"Like what?" Tommy looks bored, which nowadays is mostly a good thing. It means no nightmares have been plaguing him for the past few days.

Techno moves to speak, but pauses, sliding a bit closer to Wilbur. A week back home has done wonders for the injuries. With liberal potion and golden apple use, most of the surface level bandages have been peeled away, leaving only soft scars and the occasional rough patch.

They have finally dragged some chairs down to the ravine - more like couches, really, with their large, wide size and the furs laid across them. There's an indentation in the ground where fire crackles on

hot coals and tinder, and the smoke wafts up to connect with a second chimney Phil installed yesterday.

“The Nether,” Techno says, and he sounds like he’s turning the phrase around himself, examining its every possible imperfection. It’s so very much like Techno, ever the strategist, and something warm smolders inside of Phil at the thought.

“For potions ingredients?” Wilbur asks. He’s still so much softer than usual, voice lined by downy feathers. It’s as much a physical inability as a mental one.

“That, glowstone, and travel, in case we suddenly need to evacuate,” Techno says. “If we know what we’re doing it shouldn’t be too hard to secure. Plus-” he breaks off and glances at Tommy.

Some understanding is exchanged between them - not of a common ground, but of an agreement to put off the matter until later. Phil wonders if he should step in.

Not yet, probably. They can work it out. He needs to trust them.

“The materials for a wither makes our threats more credible,” Techno says.

“It’s about security and shit, yeah?” Tommy says. “Phil, didn’t your previous homes have a Nether outpost or something?”

“Yes,” Phil hums. The Nether is dangerous for the amatuer, which the vast majority of the people in the world are, but it’s reliably survivable for someone who has the skills and knowledge for it. And wings make escape significantly easier.

“It’s a good idea,” he agrees, thinking it over. “I suppose we’re making the portal somewhere around here?”

“Preferably somewhere isolated from the rest of the ravine,” Techno says. “That can deal with stray monsters easily. They’re all walking fire hazards.”

“That little cave we found,” Tommy says, straightening. “That you just obliterated with a pickaxe and then drank from the stream there like a fucking idiot.”

“Well, I’m alive, aren’t I?”

“For someone whose motto is ‘Technoblade never dies’ you sure take a lot of dumb risks.”

“They’re *calculated*, Tommy. *Calculated*, which means they’re not risks. They’re probabilities.”

“Same thing!”

“No, one is-”

“What’s this about the cave?” Phil interrupts. Tommy takes a deep breath.

“So I-”

“We-”

“Fuck off! I found it.”

“We were exploring the ravine together.”



“The entrance was tiny! I bet you would have missed it.”

“Technoblade never misses anything.”

“Yes you do, like-” Tommy breaks off into the fakest cough Phil’s ever heard.

Wilbur blinks beside Techno, drawing the blanket tighter around himself.

Oh.

“So *what* cave?” Phil asks, drawing the conversation back from that pitfall.

“We found a tiny cave like-” Tommy points to a spot right of Phil, near the edge of the ravine where the stone walls meet. There’s a slice of shadow larger than usual there - much larger than usual, in fact.

“Yeah, that leads to a little cave. There’s a tiny stream there too,” Techno says. “It’s big enough for a portal.”

“We’ll have to mine the obsidian though,” Tommy groans. “Not like we can carry lava that far.”

“We need to *find* lava first,” Techno says, wincing. “*That* will be a pain.”

“We don’t, actually,” Phil says, and he lets a grin spread across his face. “I have a stockpile of obsidian in the ender chest, enough for a portal.”

“Of course you do,” Techno snorts. Tommy scowls and tackles him, not that the move budges Techno one bit.

“Oi! You’re one to talk, Mr. ‘I grinded for weeks to give everyone full netherite and enchanted weapons-’”

Phil leans left and wraps a hand around Wilbur’s shoulder, sliding across the chair - couch - to pull them closer together.

“It’ll be fine,” he murmurs, tuning out the sound of Techno and Tommy squabbling meaninglessly in the background.

“It’ll be fine,” Wilbur repeats.

“We’ll be fine.”

“Yeah, Phil,” Wilbur says. “What you say.”

He lets out a breathy chuckle.

“We have the power to make it happen, after all. Shape things how we want.”

“If only it were just that simple,” Phil says. Wilbur nods, against him.

Things have been relatively peaceful. They’ve whittled away their days in the house with a stockpile of frozen meat and vegetables in a crate outside, the weather still unforgiving as usual.

He doesn’t let Wilbur out of his sight any more than necessary, and neither does Techno or Tommy. Wilbur himself, however, has mostly been just... quiet.

“Do you think we’ll truly move on?” Phil asks, and for a moment he squeezes just a bit tighter.

L’Manberg, from conception to the 16th of November, was just a few short years. It should be nothing but a blip in his long lifespan.

And yet.

Wilbur shifts. His eyes blink once, twice, and drift to meet Phil’s. They’re a brown impossibly deep, surface glistening without tears. Only reflections and regrets.

But the color is there.

“We *have* to move on, don’t we?” Wilbur says. “Or life moves on without us. I tried the second option, but you - well, it’s pretty clear we’re only doing the first now.”

He pauses, and whispers like it’s a spell, “you know time heals all wounds.”

“Yeah,” Phil says. “Yeah.”

That’s not so bad. Surely, Wilbur sees it too, or soon will. Surely, they all understand.

~\*~

It’s mid-February by their calculations and that has some connotation of romantic love or whatever, which makes the whole red and pink blanket business with Wilbur all the more entertaining. Even if it happened over a week ago.

The town around here has certainly been busy with decorations. It’s fucking overkill for a holiday about an *emotion* or whatever, but someone was handing out free squares of chocolate earlier so Tommy can’t really complain. Though he does have to wonder how they’ve managed to save so much this far into the winter.

“Glass,” Tommy says. “You forgot glass.”

“I was *going* to get them after we talked with this place’s leaders,” Techno says. “Or do you *want* to be carrying giant, fragile panes more than necessary?”

“You’re carrying them, so I don’t care,” Tommy shrugs. He hides a grin as Techno gives him an unimpressed look.

The shopkeeper clears her throat, and Techno drops a large gold coin on the counter. She places it on a scale and nods.

Tommy grabs the bag of nails off the surface and winces as it immediately drops onto the floor.

“I’m carrying the panes, huh?” Techno says with clear amusement.

Oh, that bastard. Tommy can fucking *hear* his smirk, the swish of his cape as he heads for the door.

He heaves the bag up into his arms - it’s not that big, really, the size of Squeeks the fox. Only much heavier, because fucking metal.

Techno is standing outside the shop with the two people who had been with Wilbur when they first came. He looms over them with his hood still up, shadowing his pink hair and red eyes, and Tommy is

of the firm opinion that Techno is one of the few people who's far more terrifying with his face clear than hidden.

"We're taking this discussion somewhere else," Techno says, glancing at Tommy.

Tommy sticks his tongue out at him.

They end up walking in the direction of the ocean, after much reassurance that nobody will steal from the new people and "*yes, it's perfectly safe to leave the nails under that tree, what animal is going to eat iron for breakfast?*"

There's a good stretch of land between the town and the coastline itself, Tommy realizes as they hit the trail. It had looked so tiny from the high mountain view, but at eye level he can see, as the amount of grass beneath his boots begin to thin, long stretches of barren rock and the occasional algae patch growing on them. Almost like a graveyard for the natural world.

"I'm Pearl, as I said before, and this is Scott," Pearl says as the four of them trench their way through increasingly shallower snow. "So who might you two be?"

"Wilbur did outline to you two the consequences of revealing his presence here, did he not?" Techno asks, and this is Technoblade, the strategist, the diplomat, the leader, the legend all rolled into one.

Even after so long, Tommy feels that that sense of awe wash over him.

"Yes," Pearl says. "The rest of the council has been informed, but we agreed to not let anyone else know."

"Keep it that way," Techno says.

"So who *are* you two, then? And the other person that was with you," Scott asks. Curiosity and mild suspicion is rolled into the words, but nothing hostile yet.

"Well," Tommy drawls, because fuck does he miss this sort of *performance*, "one of the group is Wilbur Soot. Take a wild guess who I am."

Pearl falters in her step for a moment, but when she turns to him her eyes are sharp and clear.

"Tommy Innit?" she says.

"Yours fucking truly," Tommy says, and flashes his grin. It's lost some of its signature wildness, but that's fine.

It has to be.

"Well, I guess if that whole exile business didn't drive you two apart the desolation wouldn't either," Scott says. "And what about you, oh mysterious third person?"

Techno reaches up and flicks down his hood.

Scott gasps. Pearl does not. Fear flashes across both their faces. Tommy lets himself snicker for just a moment.

"You see," Techno says, "how rumors would be... disadvantageous for us."

“That was Philza, wasn’t it?” Pearl says, eyes darting between Tommy and Techno. “I thought he looked familiar too. But what are you two...”

Because as far as the rest of the world is concerned, Tommy Innit and Wilbur Soot have nothing to do with Philza and Technoblade, the latter two know more for combat skills and the Antarctic Empire, and Wilbur and Tommy having their crowning achievement (or failure, depending on how one looks at it) be L’Manberg, thousands of miles to the north on a completely separate continent.

It almost catches Tommy by surprise, this sudden reminder.

“It’s none of your business,” Techno says. “We’ll trade around here and leave violence as a retaliation-only measure, and in return you people just have to keep a few secrets.”

“That’s not too hard,” Scott says. “Provided we can trust you.”

“You can’t, really,” Tommy says. He huffs when they both turn to glare at him. “It’s not a fucking threat or anything. I mean we literally can’t change your minds. There’s nothing we can fucking offer for that, unless you like drugs.”

“I know a few people-”

Scott yelps as he stumbles down, just barely catching himself as his hands crunch through thin snow. Pearl retracts her foot.

“We’ll have to base it off an assumption of truth,” she says. “That’s fine for now.”

There’s not much they can really do, Tommy knows. Fight Technoblade? They might as well just fling themselves off the mountains.

“Glad we’re able to reach an understanding,” Techno says, grinning.

“Sure, sure,” Scott coughs. “By the way, we have a system of carrier falcons organized with other trading locations, to deliver news about world events. L’Manberg is somehow an even hotter topic than before.”

Oh. Right, that.

If Tommy is honest with himself, which he fucking hates doing, then he would admit that the past few months free of worries about *L’Manberg* and *Dream* and *trying to retake and then run an entire fucking nation* has been beneficial to his health in far more ways than one.

But he can handle a little news, can’t he? Tubbo’s still there, across the ocean, and he can’t avoid that reality forever. He has let go of L’Manberg, but not Tubbo. Never Tubbo.

Has it really been just three months? The exile with Wilbur was over six.

Techno glances down at Tommy, the question clear. He’s not sure whether or not to scoff at the worry printed clear in his brother’s expression.

“Let’s fucking hear it then,” Tommy says, and oh look. They’re at the beach now, the tide a frozen stretch of gray crawling up the rocky coastline. The world expands into the horizon, and try as he might Tommy knows he will never see any land from his position as a tiny speck in the world.

Tubbo is out of sight.

“Well, *New L’Manberg*,” Pearl stops to glance at him. Tommy keeps his face as relaxed as before, slightly raising an eyebrow. He likes to think he’s doing better at this acting thing now.

*New fucking L’Manberg.*

That’s perfectly fine.

“Everyone’s wondering if or when they’ll go to war with the Dream Kingdom,” she continues. “When they started rebuilding, the Dream circled a ton of troops around it and later blocked off sea access because they weren’t paying export taxes or something.”

“Which everyone knows is just an excuse,” Scott adds, “because there were never any tariffs between the two sides before that. It’s weird, actually.”

“No shit,” Tommy snorts. “Dream’s not tariffing any place he considers his own territory. Even after the war, he still didn’t have tariffs just to send a message. That he *could*, and then completely fuck the economy up.”

“...oh.”

“Carry on,” Tommy waves. Dream’s tactics hadn’t made sense to him then - he had just made the connection as Scott said it, actually.

Huh.

“New L’Manberg was expanding their naval fleet before then, so I guess the Dream wanted to stop that,” Scott says.

Techno nods steadily, a hand on his chin. The *calculations* are probably already gearing through his head, about tactics and transportation and how important a good fleet of ships are or some other weird shit.

But Tommy’s here to have a good time and mock the green bitch from across an ocean.

“Jealousy was always Dream’s forte,” he says. “His kingdom’s navy is terrible. We always won the naval skirmishes.”

“That’s probably why he blew up L’Manberg,” Techno adds. “Jealous you guys had a house and he didn’t.”

“The whole disc conflict, too.” Tommy pauses, spiteful glee rising inside his chest. “Techno, I think we’ve just solved Dream.”

Scott clears his throat.

“So basically, the Dream’s trying to siege New L’Manberg, demanding they dismantle the navy and comply with new tariffs.”

L’Manberg is surrounded a fourth by ocean and three-fourths by the Dream SMP. It’s not a recipe for a particularly stable nation, especially when the Dream SMP is hundreds of times bigger in both size and military force.

Fuck, poor Tubbo. Why couldn’t he have just ran away with Tommy like they had discussed so long ago, or gone with Phil here?

But he already knows. Tubbo is responsible in a way Tommy can never be. He looks at L'Manberg - New L'Manberg - the nation they had built with their blood, sweat, and tears, and feels devotion where Tommy can only scrounge up dread and exhaustion.

The people need him, so much more than they ever needed Wilbur or Tommy.

"That's - pretty much how things have been for the past month over there," Pearl says. "According to what few messages we get about it, anyway. Also, Wilbur's son, or who claims to be Wilbur's son - I don't think anyone knows for sure if he's legitimate - is vice president now. Don't know if either of you..."

"Cool," Tommy says, because really. Good for Fundy.

He's the only other original founder left, after all. And Tommy doesn't doubt he was one of the few suited to the job. Hopefully.

He's certainly a much better choice than what Tommy would have been.

He's moving on, really. Tommy has to remind himself of that.

The ocean is the calmest it'll ever be, as this frozen expanse. Lines of paleness jet through the ice, just as quiet - concentrated air bubbles, Tommy learned one night long, long ago, when Wilbur read him to sleep with a science textbook.

The water in the ice is reflected in the water of the clouds above. Thin wisps like cotton. The sky is a clear, pastel blue. The sun burns a white circle on its canvas.

It's not a wasteland, though. The occasional seabird scrapes across the surface, and fish school in circles beneath the icy cover. The wind still blows, and ceases, and blows again.

The same few particles in those gusts of wind will one day reach the space where Tubbo stands during this very moment.

Life moves on.

"Let's go," Tommy says. "Phil might start to think we're doing drugs or something, taking this long to explain things."

Techno chuckles lowly. Scott scoffs, and Pearl gives him a hard shove. This time he actually falls face first with a yelp. Thankfully for him, the stones have smooth surfaces.

Tommy turns back in the direction of the town and takes a step forward, and then another step, and suddenly he's walking back through his own snowy footprints, though each step taken is just slightly off from what had come before.

And Techno's catching up behind him, his strides a constant, steady beat.

And the wind is alive with the winter chill.

And they're heading home.

feedback appreciated a lot as always!! thanks for everyone who's read this far, i dont say this enough <3

i reply to comments on Sundays! Follow my [Twitch](#) where I stream it live. I also have plans to do some live writing sessions.

talk/ask about this fic or my other fics on [Discord](#).

ask questions about VoS (valley of serenity) or anything else on my [tumblr](#).

here's my [twitter](#). idk why I have it.

# feel how the winter succumbs to the spring

## Chapter Notes

Check out the [Discord](#), if you wish. Pings for updates.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

There's no schedule for a return to normalcy. No plans for either gradual descents or sudden transitions. Instead Techno finds it creeping upon them in long stretches of chopping wood, in nailing planks for bedroom walls or sharing stories on the couches surrounding their fireplace.

And just as easily that normalcy darts away. It's not any predictable line, nothing to plan for, only an erratic anti-pattern that makes itself invisible when the strangest disturbances are introduced. In off-hand remarks of wine and beer that Tommy twitches too hard against, in long nights when Wilbur still sobs for help, for relief, for some alleviation of the pain that crushes his windpipes dead in the darkness. And Techno can only sit next to him, quietly murmuring old legends of poets and magic until the nightmares pass again.

Still, though, life moves on and so does Techno. He makes this a conscious realization a few days after he and Tommy return, carrying with them nails, glass, and various other tools and materials to further construction of the house.

It's him and Wilbur. Him reinforcing the house's internal walls while Wilbur watches, crutches beneath his arms. Phil and Tommy are off with the horses, conducting more exploration of their area.

It's him and Wilbur. Like it was before, all silent and methodic in every action. Check the edges, hammer the nails just so, measure the wood and inspect for signs of rot. Sand the grain and polish the walls glossy like raven feathers.

Skills they learned together, and skills now only one of them can put to use.

Techno was never, will never, be a social creature. Wilbur has no desire to become one again, at least for now.

But they are brothers, close brothers, who both understand the consequences of silence. And so they await the hidden trigger. Brushing against that silken, bloodied thread with the hesitance of pre-storm calms, the thin weight of springtime butterflies.

It is, eventually, Wilbur who reaches out and twists the weave, drawing taut the line from Techno to him with an insistence that also borders timidity. Shakingly leaning his crutches forwards.

"Do you ever think about going back to L'Manberg?" he asks, voice hovering like wisps held together by that same thread he dared tug.

"Sometimes," Techno says after a pause, lowering the hammer he holds onto the ground. "Not seriously. Do you?"



Because that is the real question, isn't it? L'Manberg is a nation of oppression to Techno, but more importantly, it is a nation of trauma to Tommy and Wilbur. He can't go around dismantling every government in the world, nor does he care to when they hold no power directly against him. Besides, there is a special incentive to keep their distance now.

Some things are more important than his systemic ideals, and some ideals are impossible to achieve. Techno knows he has to acknowledge both facts fully, especially given how Wilbur's previous failure to confront his own contradictions have led to... this.

But Wilbur, to Wilbur L'Manberg is not just trauma, but also attachment. A deeply unwelcome one by all of them, but one nonetheless. Those threads have frayed, split, been scraped against cliffs and valleys, but they are not gone.

Or are they?

"Sometimes." Wilbur echoes Techno's response, and turns to a newly installed window within the room. It gives a beautiful view - the village sprawled in the distance, the ocean still frozen. The sunrise's brilliance casting gleams of dancing light across icy surfaces.

"I think about my L'Manberg, Techno," Wilbur says softly. "But the place over there, across those waters. It's not my L'Manberg anymore."

"It's not," Techno agrees, moving over to stand next to him. "It's a lot more than that now."

"Everything that was mine, gone," Wilbur murmurs. "All blown up."

"Well, not all of it."

"You think so?" There's an edge deeply skeptical, tinted with bitterness.

Something rises in Techno's throat, spiked traps and bile. Tread carefully.

He forces a slow blink, leaning closer to the window. They should put up some ledges, inside and out. Maybe a place for flower beds.

"You brought independence, Wilbur," Techno says. "People followed you for a reason. You gave them hope, ideals, something powerful enough to construct an entire nation out of. There's still a nation standing there right now, and there's still independence. The will of L'Manberg is going strong."

"You mean, the 'suck it, green boi' line in the constitution?" Wilbur says, eyes downcast and tired. "I suppose that's still a spirit they hold, yes."

"But also other ideas," Techno presses. "You think your symphony is gone, ended, but it was never just your symphony. That's impossible. So what factors had to be true for L'Manberg to exist in the first place?"

Wilbur stills.

"Where are you going with this?"

There's confusion, but also - nervousness. He's taken aback, shoulders hunching lowly.

But Techno's mulled over this train of thought for days now, and it's about time they discuss it. Wilbur knew what he was getting into.

“Humor me, Wilbur,” he says. “You know your history. What needs to happen for an independent nation to form in a hostile environment?”

Wilbur glances from Techno to the village, each house a colored silhouette dotted on a wash of gray and white.

“There has to be a reason - motive,” he says. “Which for L’Manberg was Dream’s rule. His kingdom’s too large and not administered effectively in every region, so the people of those outer areas never feel particularly loyal to their supposed country.”

“Which means...”

“The people of L’Manberg had a semi-independent governing authority long before I showed up,” Wilbur finishes. He sighs. “I get it, Techno.”

“But you need to say it,” Techno says.

*I need to hear it*, he doesn’t say, but it is understood.

“Yes,” Wilbur agrees, with a reluctance that still enfolds understanding.

After a moment, he continues.

“The Dream SMP has a system of taxation for its provinces,” he says. “In return it ferries resources between its areas when hardships strike, and provides a central governing body to coordinate between regions. But there’s long since been favorites, better resources for where the wealth is concentrated. Some places like L’Manberg already deeply resented that.”

“There was a famine in the Dream SMP shortly before you and Tommy arrived,” Techno prompts. “A locust problem. But the Dream SMP’s relative lack of trade establishments means it had harsh difficulty importing enough food to make up for it.”

“Yeah,” Wilbur says. “The capital and upper provinces had much higher survival rates. The people outside those areas were furious, especially when the tax rates remained the same. They wanted out, but out of those places only the people of L’Manberg’s area had an economy which stood a chance of functioning as an independent nation. Coastal cities means the area had their own trade routes and unofficial agreements.”

“And you saw that opportunity,” Techno says. It’s a question, of some sorts - Wilbur’s motivations remain muddled to him even now.

Hopefully, for not too much longer.

“I did,” Wilbur whispers. “The other places wouldn’t work. Starving, disconnected illiterates don’t make good revolutionaries, Techno, but the L’Manberg’s economic connections meant it had fared a lot better than most in the famine, and that wealth also gives it a better education system. I saw the beginnings of a nation and thought I could lead it. The geography is - it’s not ideal, but there’s enough fertile land to be self-sustaining and with ocean access, along with the already existing culture of trade and independence - it seemed so perfect. It was a chance to leave a grand legacy in the world.”

“*Your* grand legacy?”

“Mine,” Wilbur confirms, and now the guilt is clear, sagging every muscle of his body. “I thought it would be my legacy.”

“And yours only.”

“And mine only, for me to shape.”

Techno takes a deep breath.

“So you had the clarity to choose a place where the chances for a successful revolution was higher than most, but you still thought you could build and run an entire country under your image, and your image only? And expect it to work?”

“I know,” Wilbur gasps, nearly falling forward. Techno moves closer, but a hand waves him off. “I’m - I was stupid. So stupid. I’m still so stupid.”

Tears collect at the edges of his eyes, tiny pearls of molten glass that drip down his cheeks. Techno takes another step closer, gaze darting for any signs of collapse.

“I’m fine,” Wilbur says tightly, fingers whitening around his crutches. “I - I’m...”

“Wilbur,” Techno whispers, feeling the name break like pale, shattering porcelain beneath the weight of their confessions.

Everything spiraled wrong for them, ideals twisted with the blindness only madmen could hold within themselves. And that’s what Wilbur was, wasn’t he? A madman.

Now he’s a husk of that madness, hollowed out to suffocating guilt and nightmares wrapping around his throat each night with the tendrils of withering regret.

And Techno is here with him, and without the rest of his family, because once again he feels the crushing, crushing desperation urging him to reconnect. Try in vain to rewire all their threads and pieces back into a semblance of an untroubled existence. To achieve that state of serenity which hovers as pretensely unattainable above them.

Is he here to fail again, with no headway made and everything left to lose?

“Techno,” Wilbur says. He drags himself forward in a step so painfully slow, like a note shakily thinned out to exhaustion. “I know. I didn’t - L’Manberg was never me. I - I had generals and council meetings and soldiers - people. So many people. They died for independence and the meadows of the battlefields, Techno, they were so red. The blood of all these martyrs, watering everything red. We all saw so much blood.”

“And you thought L’Manberg was only your symphony,” Techno says, almost accusingly. He shouldn’t, not now, not so close - or should he? Is the sooner the better?

“Your unfinished symphony, you called it.”

He doesn’t know. But either way, he’s committed.

*Unfinished symphony.* The words have long tasted bitter in his mouth, the very representation of Wilbur’s descent into insanity. Now they take on a new flavor as well - a sudden sour undertone, blooming with a painful sharpness like stabbing rapiers and broken quills. An incredulous sort of suddenness, because Wilbur - Wilbur *should have known better.*

He began that descent the moment he casted aside years of worth of knowledge and observation to declare L’Manberg in his image. One delusion spiralling into so many others.

And he strung Tommy along with him. He tried to string Phil and himself along that cursed, cursed narrative too.

“Why?” Techno whispers, shaking. “You knew better. We all did. *Why did you think it would work?*”

Wilbur buries his face in his shoulder for a few minutes, breaths cycling flimsily. When he looks up drying tears are smeared across his cheeks, only to be drowned just as quickly. Glittering glass pearls, Techno thinks again. So easily shattered.

“I was jealous and delusional, okay?” he whispered. “I saw the Antarctic Empire. I saw how you guys disregarded all the rules - *all* of them, somehow turned that frozen wasteland into a military empire and establish yourselves as supreme leaders of everywhere the horizon stretched to. When people think of the empire they think of you two. I wanted - I wanted to be like that. To show I’m not a failure.”

“Phil would never think of you as a failure, Wilbur,” Techno says. He reaches out, steadying Wilbur against his shoulder. This time, there’s no resistance.

“But I - I wanted to be known like that. To achieve fame like that.” Wilbur laughs, a dry, choked sound of defeat. “I guess in a way I got my wish. We’re really a family of destruction, aren’t we?”

“To others, maybe,” Techno says. “Wilbur, the Antarctic Empire was never built to last. It lasted a few months tops, and everything collapsed the moment we stopped conquering and funneling resources into our army. It was only ever meant to be temporary fun, not function as an actual nation.”

There was an inherent implication of power within the Antarctic Empire, but it stretched to pure military might and nothing else. No fleshed out legal codes or rousing histories or patriotic symbolism, and especially not any obligation to support their conquests from the people involved. In the end, it was a temporary project for bored military enthusiasts, Techno and Phil at the helm.

Always meant to be discarded and moved on from, eventually.

Contrasted with L’Manberg... well, it’s the opposite of everything.

Did Wilbur not realize? Did Tommy not either?

“I get that now,” Wilbur murmurs, leaning further against Techno’s shoulder. Techno readjusts his grip, and to his relief Wilbur’s legs cease their subtle shaking.

“But not then,” Techno says, his turn to tighten his voice. “And you did it with Tommy.”

Wilbur bows his head.

“With Tommy,” he agrees. “I’ve - that’s my biggest regret, Techno. That I was so convinced I pulled Tommy into it, even deeper than me.”

“It should be,” Techno says. But he lets his tone fall, exhaustion pooling.

They’ve admitted to the deed and to the guilt. Now they must admit to acceptance, or at least the eventual path to it. It’s never a destination either, just a long, winding road that fades the further and further one goes.

“I’m sorry me and Phil weren’t there either,” Techno says, turning back to the window, the sun rising with a clear, dazzling white in the far distance above the ocean. The sheer drops and rocky seas falling

far below into the valleys, bare treelines crawling up the sides. The occasional sprig of green glistening with morning dew.

“We should have noticed,” he says. “We should have talked more.”

A failure on all their parts, except Tommy's.

“I’m sorry I was - I was so selfish,” Wilbur says. His voice doesn’t crack, but they feather into a subdued remorse that burns against Techno’s heart. “It all started when I deluded myself into thinking I could run a whole nation. In my own image. Without anyone else. I - I know.”

“It’s always more than that, but we understand this too,” Techno says. And means it for everything.

For nations and secrets, whispered dreams and trembling madness. The paling skies and shadowing valleys.

Wilbur nods softly, and they stand watching the world be cast in a dawning light through a window of a home they had built with their family of old scars and healing wounds.

## Chapter End Notes

i reply to comments on sundays live! Also do other dsmp related stuff. [Twitch](#) where I stream. i also have plans to do some live writing sessions.

sorry this is a shorter chapter with just this one scene. tried to see where else to place more scenes in but no matter how i looked at it i felt it would mess up the flow of the chapter and the tone i wanted to go for here, so its just this one. hopefully it means the next chapter will come sooner.

anyway did I just base the Dream SMP’s foreign policy off 15-18th century china? yes i did dont @ me (actually do on my [twitter](#) or [tumblr](#) if there be art of this because apparently sometimes that happens and i dont know?)

## and when you listen the tune is just so slightly different

### Chapter Notes

#### [Discord](#)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“You ready?” Phil murmurs, fingers trailing down the leathery sheen of the elytra one last time. There’s no crinkles to smooth out, no thinning patches of wispy, see-through membrane where he can justifiably spend a few more painstakingly hours strengthening with a needle and the corpses of phantom dreams.

Still. He begins picking his way down the wings one last time.

“Phil,” Tommy protests, irritation tugging the corners of his lips. “Phil, it’s *fine*, you’ve already obsessed over it this morning. I’m not gonna fall.”

“Tommy,” Phil says, the name so familiar and right, and yet still he finds himself catching the barest hint of hesitation when he speaks it in such a way. It’s something too close to a chide or scolding, a tone he has no right to.

However, pushing that hesitation aside without lingering has long since become a staple of his routine.

“Tommy,” he repeats. The next few words press coldly against his throat, but he speaks them anyway and tries to soften their edges. “We thought Wilbur wouldn’t fall either.”

*And we know how that turned out.*

Tommy looks down, at the rocky ledge he and Phil stand on, and then a bit further out at the sheer drops below them. The forest bordering the town’s edges are the destination, but it’s so far below Phil could cover the entire settlement in his vision with an outstretched hand.

And down the mountain sides lay the beds of loose gravel, hidden sharp rocks, sheets of snow that are avalanches waiting to happen with the warming spring.

Tommy has rockets and he has the elytra. Phil hadn’t exactly been ecstatic when he found out what his youngest was up to, flying circles in the air currents all alone, but Tommy’s determination prevails as it usually does.

It’s not the idea itself which bothers him. Phil won’t argue with another tool in Tommy’s arsenal, another way for him to fight or escape or feel *free*.

But at the very least - well, bird parents should be *there* for their chicks’ first flights. And though Tommy has long since grown past the chick stage, he absolutely should not be leaping off cliffs alone right now.

“Yeah,” Tommy finally says. Phil continues to pick his way through the elytra’s threaded membranes, and receives no further protest.

There’s a new shrug of acceptance in Tommy’s posture. They both understand the motions are more a reassurance for Phil.

He eventually lets the elytra fall from his grasp, and flares up his own wings. So much bigger, more versatile, feathers and limbs able to twist and turn in ways the End’s denizens could never achieve.

“Ready?” he asks Tommy.

“Sure,” Tommy responds, and takes a step to the very edge. Phil stifles the panic that suddenly leaps inside of him.

“I’ll be right next to you,” he says.

“I know,” Tommy says. He pauses, and adds, “thanks.”

*Thanks.* An acknowledgement. A response to responsibility being fulfilled.

Phil nods.

Tommy leans back for a second, bracing, eyes pinned against a distant destination - and then, in a blur, he’s falling.

Two pairs of wings snap out simultaneously.

And they’re gliding down together.

~\*~

The air is cold and crisp and sings with the coming of spring. Tommy knows fucking shit about springtime showers, but the taste of rain is a distant horizon nevertheless approaching.

Huh. March is almost over. November 16th feels so far away now.

Talking while tearing through the air at near terminal speeds is not particularly effective, so Tommy settles for giving Phil a wide grin as the elytra slows his descent to just below pure falling.

Wind thunders in his ears. It’s fucking amazing. He could spend all day like this.

In the air. No chains, no worries.

Free.

But alas, they have plans to execute and people to meet, and so when treelines thicken and the town approaches Tommy angles himself flat.

The landing, diving into an open clearing in the forest and bundled in Phil’s guiding wings, is a first endeavor with only a slight jolt. Tommy grins up at Phil again, the thrum of flight still coursing through his veins.

“Fuck yeah,” he manages to say, breath heaving.

And when Phil holds a wing out, Tommy grasps it, letting the motions guide him as they head towards the town together.

~\*~

“So is this meant to be permanent?” Pearl asks, tilting her head.

“What is?” Phil asks back, though he’s sure he already knows. The response is more for confirmation than anything else.

After all, of all the questions...

Pearl seems to realize his line of thought. She sets down her mug of coffee and nods around them at the lacquered café. Nearly empty, most people already done with their morning routines.

“Well, unlike some people I don’t go poking around personal business,” she says. “I don’t really care why L’Manberg’s supposedly dead founding fathers are here, or what you and Technoblade have to do with them.”

She turns to Tommy, who’s sitting a little ways away at a different table, nibbling on a bar of chocolate with his eyes closed and shoulders loose. The elytra is safely packed away in a leather satchel hung loosely at his side, the color of summer leaves. A gift Tubbo had presented to him long ago, if Phil remembers correctly.

Pearl bites her lip for a moment, before continuing.

“I do, however, need to know your plans regarding what you’ll be generally doing around here. How it would concern Sanctuary, more specifically.”

Sanctuary. A strange name for a strange town. But the place hums with an ethereal energy beneath the rivers and valleys and in the deep, swaying forests. There’s magic around them, far more than usual.

“We’re living on that mountain for the foreseeable future,” Phil says. “Building a home, living, the usual. I assure you we have no ill intentions towards this place.”

“And you’re keeping a low profile?”

“That is the plan for now. Ideally, as few people should know about us being here as possible.”

“And what does ‘for now’ mean, exactly?”

Phil looks up to meet Pearl’s eyes. There’s no way she or her town can contest what they choose to do, and they both know this.

But while violence is a universal language, it is not the only language. It feels good, Phil realizes, to negotiate with something else.

Mutual respect, perhaps. An understanding that they would both be better off without subtle threats at every turn, if only for the health of themselves and their families.

“Well, we wish for peace for a while,” Phil says. “But there’s no doubt we’ll grow restless eventually. You know our reputations.”

“And when that time comes?”



“We’re not sure,” he says. “That is still a misty future for me. But rest assured, your town has saved Wilbur and been reasonably hospitable to us. We will not do anything that would actively endanger this place.”

When they leave for a new home, when the call of adventure whispers against Phil’s wings and his children are healed and ready to unleash themselves upon the world once again, there is no way to predict what course might be taken. But there are ways of predicting what they would avoid.

Pearl leans back and drains her cup dry before scooping her fork into a half-eaten muffin on the plate before her.

Phil grasps his own cup of tea and takes a sip.

It’s warm, a blend of fresh herbs reminiscent of spring breezes. Thyme and parsley, maybe, with a hint of sweet honey.

This place has quality drinks. Perhaps they’ll come down more regularly than Phil anticipated.

Tommy is still at his own seat, fingers dancing around with a few puzzle pieces laid out before him. It was so easy to forget he’s still a child. A mature one in many ways, perhaps, but the extent of his social interaction should not be limited to just the people who've caused him so much trauma.

That guilt is rising again. Phil finds it in himself to squeeze it down and focus on mending the wounds of past mistakes instead.

“The council already had a talk about this,” Pearl says. “Most of the population haven’t seen your wings or even full faces yet. They don’t know who you are. And we’ll try to keep it that way for now, but you have to cooperate on this too.”

“Hiding identifying features, I know,” Phil says. He reaches out to tug at his cloak a bit, more a reminder than any actual adjustment. They flutter over his wings, softly brushing.

“Wilbur and Tommy aren’t too recognizable right now, especially without the uniforms,” Pearl adds. “I imagine when Wilbur’s healed enough to come down again, no one will remember enough of L’Manberg’s original leader to make the connection. And even I didn’t recognize Tommy.”

“Tommy’s still growing,” Phil says. “He’ll be completely unrecognizable to the general public soon, trust me.”

He wonders if Tommy wishes to keep it that way, demeanor so different, all the physical subtleties stacking up. Or if he’s forgotten. It’s another question to ask.

“True,” Pearl says. “And people know you more for the wings. There’s actually not that many accurate paintings of you.”

“Never sat still enough for it.”

“So the main problem is Technoblade.”

“Techno hates social interaction,” Phil laughs. “I doubt he’ll come down much more than necessary. But yes, that is a problem for when he does.”

Long pink hair and crimson eyes, teeth sharp as needles and tusks rising inches out from his mouth. Ears a pale and pointed shape too unnatural to be of the Overworld.

“A hood and tinted glasses should be enough if we’re careful,” Phil muses. “As long as people don’t recognize me they shouldn’t jump to any conclusions.”

Pearl seems satisfied with that answer for now, nodding.

“Trade starts coming regularly in a week or two,” she says. “It usually begins with other towns and cities along this coast, but in a month or so we’ll have ships from across the continent.”

“Including L’Manberg?”

Phil looks up to see Tommy staring at them both, something thoughtful in his expression. Strangely, he gives little away to most in the curve of his lips, or the way his eyes blink with a composed calmness.

It’s a subtle change that has slipped on slowly, more and more like a subtle tidal wave, until the realization crashes into Phil’s face in a tall, cold glacier cracking down.

Tommy is a child, but not really anymore. After enduring so much he came out stronger for it, has learned and adapted. And yet that fire still burns within him, the same bright vivacity as before. More tempered, more wary, but no less fierce.

He’s grown.

And that is enough to settle the tiny storm churning inside Phil’s stomach. He lets a small smile crease his expression.

“Probably, if their situation with Dream doesn’t escalate in a worse direction,” Pearl shrugs. “All the news we get is pretty delayed, though.”

“Alright.” Tommy turns his focus to Phil. “I wanna explore more shit around here, yeah? Not be some stupid hermit like Techno.”

The determination, so clear in his eyes.

There is room for apologies, somewhere between the spaces.

But for now Phil smiles and nods and stands up, gesturing for Tommy to lead the way out.

~\*~

They end up simply wandering around the town, greeting curious gazes and trying various foods that aren’t just the same few wild greens and whatever poor creature Techno most recently shot down. Tommy particularly delights in an afternoon meal of pork chops and broccoli, with dessert being a piece of crusted bread smeared with so much honey Phil thinks he’s trying to drown it.

Hm. The pattern of holes on the loaf *does* look oddly like a smiley face...

There’s a few more purchases made as well. Bolts of cloth - linen, cotton, wool, though he passes on the silk by virtue of price and quality. Thread as well. A few seeds Phil’s ender chest storage had been lacking, like carrots and strawberries. Tommy insists on more flower seeds and bulbs.

They get hay as well - the horses had been living off a slowly dwindling supply mixed with what coarse grass and vegetation they could dig up.

It's all arranged in the ender chest storage. Phil thinks he could sell the item for an entire mansion, with how useful yet rare it is.

The people are generally accommodating. Business is good, after all, and it seems this place has trust in its leadership. Easier to maintain in a community small as this.

The final purchase comes when they're passing a music store, instruments displayed clear through the thick glass of the walls. The words *For Sale* banners itself above them.

One gleams above the others, like a gem in the corner of Phil's raven-like eyes. A guitar with wood pale as birch bark, hung in a position so similar it claws another ache in Phil's chest.

Instruments don't store well in ender chests, in need of constant use and care. Otherwise Wilbur would have had music beneath his fingers a long time ago.

Tommy is the one to make the first step, however, almost barreling through the dark mahogany doors. Phil follows, feet light.

"Hello, new people!" The man at the counter leans forward, grinning. "I know that look. Got your eye on something specific?"

Tommy lowers the guitar into his hands.

"How much?" Phil asks, moving up to them.

"Ten ounces of gold," the owner says. "Coins, or equivalent worth in emeralds would work too."

"Trying to fucking rip us off or something?" Tommy asks, raising an eyebrow. But he slings the guitar over his shoulders, adjusting the strap loosely, and plays a few chords.

The shop owner, hilariously, looks scandalized at the action. That aggressive protectiveness musicians have over their instruments, perhaps? Wilbur had always become so snappish at others handling his own guitar.

If he could adopt an attitude of devotion like that again, Phil would be so incredibly relieved.

*A goal*, he reminds himself. *Something to work towards*.

He wishes he could deal with abstractions like Wilbur or Techno, but the past few months have only furthered light on those limitations.

The sound is clear, thrumming deeply throughout the room. It has a softer edge than Wilbur's previous instrument, presumably still abandoned in the lightless depths of Pogtopia.

"Fucking fine," Tommy huffs. "Whatever."

Ah. He thinks the quality's worth the gold, then, not that money really matters for them.

Phil digs around his satchel and comes up with the appropriate weight of coins. Some were simply casted by smooth, measured molds, and others have the imprints of their various origin nations. But gold is gold, at the end of the day, and so after some scrutiny and measurements the shop owner nods and accepts the pieces.

"You want the case with that?" he asks. "It's two more ounces."

Tommy makes a sour expression.

“The case always comes with the instrument,” he says.

“You’re the one who brought only the guitar up to me.”

Phil silently slides two more coins over.

The case is lifted up from somewhere below the counter.

“Nice to see new people around here, especially spenders,” the man says.

“Don’t push your luck,” Tommy says. He’s met with a roll of eyes.

“I’m Ninja, by the way,” the man adds. “And before you ask - no, I’m not claiming to be the one that’s famous. There’s plenty of people named Ninja in the world.”

“Fucking sucks for them.” Tommy fits the guitar inside the case. Then he zips it up and slings it over his shoulder.

“Though you do seem familiar as well,” Phil notes. The memory exists, somewhere in his mind.

Ninja shrugs.

“Been to plenty of places in my life,” he says, and leaves it at that.

It’s a clear dismissal, as they’re not here for anything else. So Tommy turns to leave and Phil follows suit.

He ends up taking the guitar from Tommy once they’re ready to head back, holding the case firmly in his hands as he flies and Tommy leaves white rocket trails beside him.

The sun is setting its orange glow when they arrive back at the house. Techno has about finished the walls, and nailed in the doors. There are five empty rooms aside from the living room and a kitchen area, one much larger than the rest. An attempt at dinner has already been made, more successful than Phil would have thought.

When night brushes its dark against the windows, its cold against the walls, its lullaby against the internal rhythm of their minds, the beds are pushed into place in the same large room. A precaution, a reminder.

But it’s also safety, warmth.

And so sleep comes easily.

~\*~

It’s morning, light cascading through in showers too bright and blazing. It burned Wilbur’s skin the first time after he was dragged screaming silently from death’s grasp, the hungry cold clinging in swaths through his body, his soul shivering feebly.

It is still the case now. But the pain has numbed to stinging and the light itself softened. Or no, that’s not right - the light was and will always remain how it is. But his skin has warmed to it. The rest of him might eventually, fully, encompass the world like it did before.

That is a distant plane of existence on the horizon. Horizons can be crossed, but not soon. Not fast. Not easy. An endurance marathon that operates by no rules.

And to just admit so makes as little progress as a single, tiny step.

“Wilbur, can you stretch out your arm?” Phil asks. There’s tape in his hands - measuring tape, mint green and numbers faded.

He stretches his right arm out, the left still in its cast. It’s healing - there’s more structure every day, that gradual transition to normalcy he and his family crave in such different ways.

Phil takes his measurements, and then wounds the tape beside his legs, and then his torso and various other areas Wilbur eventually zones out of.

Light, and freedom, and life. These concepts and more, flying around him. Blurring.

What does he want?

Phil sits comfortably beside him on the living room couch, cloth in his hands and scissors beneath his fingers.

And Wilbur watches, the slow rise and fall of his chest humming softly in his ears.

A needle replaces the scissors eventually. Up and down and up and down, blue thread on soft yellow linen.

Wilbur likes the color, the texture, the way the long sleeved shirt is coming together in lines like ocean waves. He realizes this in another slow ascension, sliding smoothly through his mind until it makes itself a piece of knowledge that seems it was always there.

There seems to be many such realizations, recently.

A door opens from across the room. Tommy stands with fingers rubbing against his eyes, and when his vision focuses on them a smile crosses his face.

A small, simple smile. Devoid of strain, lacking underlying tones of hesitance. It is an expression of happiness borne of only their mutual existence in the home they’ve built.

When was the last time Wilbur has beheld such a sight? Such a feeling curling tendrils of soft light inside of him? Molding new, fresh foundations over the smoldering, decaying old ones which were left abandoned the moment Wilbur had gazed upon the people of L’Manberg and sang a song of false glory for the world to hear.

This new sensation settles in harmonizing notes, the roots of a new tranquility.

It’s his life that he must live now. And there’s more than one chain clasping his soul against the world of existence.

“What are you staring at me for?” Tommy asks.

Wilbur finds himself blinking. He looks away, to the dawning sunrise. Yet another one, for another day.

“It’s nothing,” he murmurs. Tommy’s footsteps draw louder.

“We got a guitar for you yesterday,” he says, plopping himself beside Wilbur. A mop of blond hair covers half his vision.

From the angle it seems his head is crowned with the sun, gleaming in the light, like the eternal phoenix of legends. That is another realization made slowly as the seconds tick by for him.

“Oh?” Wilbur murmurs.

“Yeah. All white and shit, the wood’s a weird one. Very cool. Since you don’t really have, uh - functional fingers, I’m borrowing it until you do.”

“I’m sure you’ll play great,” Wilbur says.

Tommy leans his face closer into Wilbur’s, eyes scrunched. It’s doubt, plain as fresh spring days, and the beginnings of a scoff ready to grate back against anticipated mockery.

But Wilbur means the words. Tommy has talent, and determination, and he only ever sounded terrible when he wanted to, during the few times he’s picked up Wilbur’s former guitar.

“Thanks,” Tommy eventually says, settling back onto his couch position. “Hey Phil, are you doing old people things again?”

“Old people things?”

“Knitting and shit or whatever. It’s an old people activity, and you are doing it. Therefore, you are a old person.”

“Well, I won’t deny I’m older than most people,” Phil laughs. “Where’d you learn such phrases from, Tommy? Techno been teaching you his logical rhetoric?”

“It’s argumentative rhetoric, Phil. Your memory’s terrible, which is also an old person thing. You bones must be fucking creaking.”

Phil quirks an eyebrow, and the expression is so off-putting, so *sudden*, aching with a gentle familiarity recalling back to carefree childhood - Wilbur finds himself turning away, eyes closed.

Fuck, is this - is this what he’s living with? It’s - it’s *family*. Comfort and light and kind tenderness.

His head hurts. His hand, the only free one, the other still bound in chains and promises, grasping, clawing, pulling at his hair. It’s so wrong - everything is wrong and hurts-

“Wilbur?” Phil’s voice is like a bright shot in the darkness. There is only a half-hearted attempt at catching it, and it fails.

“I-” His crutches are beneath him, sanded and warm. Too warm. His fingers fumble around them.

“Wilbur, are you alright? You sound like you’re dying or some shit.”

“I’m fine,” Wilbur forces out.

The doorway. It’s in view. Techno’s still asleep in their room, isn’t he?

“I’m going back to bed for a bit,” he says. In the mired molasses of his mind he manages to drag through a few thoughts, limply strung along like his walking gait.

It all feels so wrong, this - this idea of home. And yet so right. He doesn't understand. Nothing makes - nothing makes sense.

L'Manberg is gone, left behind, but - but what's next? Living for his family?

Wilbur wants to, so badly. He wants to help them. Please them.

But it *hurts*.

When did family hurt so much?

When did love hurt so much?

He really is a twisted creature, isn't he? Developed with the worst of humanity. Selfish, destructive, dripping sloughs of madness and grief, morphed into diseases that blight all it touches.

Nothing good has been wielded by his words, his hands, since he first slashed the bonds of family away from himself.

Something gives way beneath him.

His bed. White sheets, the red and pink quilt. Snowflakes drifting so softly across its surface.

They have a table here, polished dark pine with a drawer.

He blinks and his journal is in his lap. A quill in his right hand, whitened insides filled with black ink. It feels wrong. It's not his dominant hand.

*Entry 20*

It's shaky lines, thin squiggles. Nothing like the elegant script he was once so proud of.

Is it the 20th entry?

He doesn't know, doesn't remember. His fingers aren't flipping back pages.

Does he not want to remember?

He retraces the letters, numbers. *Entry 20*.

A bit bolder. Another tiny step.

The quill tip presses against the page again.

*Things are wrong. Everything*

He stops.

Everything what?

What does he write? His thoughts, his world, his understanding? For more legitimacy, a false comfort that he hasn't had his awareness ripped apart again? Despite how it solidifies no reality?

*Everything hurts*, he writes, and it's true enough.

*Everything hurts and I don't understand anymore. I want to live for Tommy and Techno and Phil. I can live for them. But for what else? Why do I want to live?*

*Why does living hurt so much?*

“Wilbur?”

That's Techno. Techno is awake and - and he's beside him, sitting down, looking down and Wilbur can't bring himself to close the pages and hide his scrawling, barely legible mess of thoughts.

Does Techno understand better, like he did before? Could Techno explain again, like with L'Manberg?

Strange, yet again. Techno was never the most well versed with matters like this before, but then again - then again, Wilbur was supposed to be the knowledgeable one.

“Wilbur,” Techno says, eyes scanning down.

“Hi,” Wilbur mumbles. “Good morning.”

Light brushes against both their faces. Warmth from the sun.

“You're - it's support, Wilbur,” Techno says, a finger tracing the edges of the words that are still glistening with ink. “You're getting used to us supporting you. We should have been there before.”

Wilbur looks down blankly at the pages.

*“Support.”*

“Try-” a hand reaches out and briefly holds Wilbur's.

The touch burns.

He wishes it stayed a little longer.

“-try writing that?” Techno finishes, something like hope in his voice. Rising, bending, the cautious guidance of someone unused to such actions.

Write that. Write what?

*I'm being supported.*

Wilbur blinks at the words.

They feel peculiar. Something long lost to the ages only now resurfacing. They feel...

They feel true.

That warmth drapes itself around him again. He finds himself leaning deeper into it, suddenly starving, craving, *begging* like an addict for his drug-

“I'm here,” Techno rasps against his ear. Wilbur takes another deep breath, shuddering against his brother's chest, the hugging embrace.



He tries not to sob, little hiccing stutters curled in his throat. A pitiful feeling of relief attached to each one.

“Do you - are you okay with this?” Techno asks.

His fingers move, mind trailing behind, quill scratching.

*I ~~ne~~ want more hugs.*

Some well of shame overflows into the words, but Techno adjusts his arms to hold more of Wilbur and mutters a wordless reassurance.

“That’s fine,” he says, continuing. “That’s great, actually. I love hugs.”

“You do?” Wilbur asks, vision blurring. He blinks once, twice, his world clearing just a bit.

A finger brushes away his tears before they can fall onto the pages.

“Yep,” Techno says.

He didn’t before, or so he has claimed. When the title of Blood God became almost unbearable, when Techno would spend weeks, months, sometimes years alone in various arenas and wars with only a letter or two sent back. When he had shied away from even Phil’s touch.

How they have all been brought so low.

*We both want hugs.*

*We’re brought low together.*

The idea sits inside him, a more reassuring presence than Wilbur thought possible.

“Life is worth living just for the hugs, in fact. I would know,” Techno adds.

“It’s worth living for books, oceans, and hugs,” Wilbur murmurs. Some quote from long ago, modified and passed through the centuries.

“And family,” Techno says.

*And family.*

The words are jagged to write, uncertain edges catching on every letter.

But they’re written, and they’re legible.

And true? Does he dare hope that?

*I am being supported. By my family. I like hugs.*

Techno squeezes Wilbur’s shoulder faintly. An encouragement.

He continues writing.

*The world is oceans and rivers, wavering trees and high sky currents. The aroma of springtime flowers and cold of winter blizzards.*

*It is history pages and paintings of historymakers still living or long dead, inaccuracies a story all on their own. It is a revolving, ever changing truth that spirals against the minds which dip within creation and creativity.*

*It is humming notes and melodies passed through singing, through playing. Plucked string and vibrating reeds. Fingers following paths brought to musical life by those before them, to shape the futures of those after them.*

*I loved those things. I loved the spring and summer and fall and winter. I loved history and knowledge and music and creativity. I loved the warmth of family and newly dawning sunlight.*

*I love*

He closes his eyes for a moment, bright white flashing behind his vision. A persistent flame that howls higher, brighter with each new word.

“Wilbur?”

*I love all these things. I love my family.*

*I want to live for all these things.*

He does.

He can try.

He will try.

“What a day to be alive,” Wilbur says. The words twirling slowly, hesitantly in the space between them.

“Indeed,” Techno agrees. “Indeed.”

A soft melody flows its way to his ear, rising up and down. For a moment he thinks he’s imagining things, his previous mania coming back as some ghostly version of itself - but then Techno perks up, and Wilbur realizes it has to be Tommy on the guitar, somewhere in the living room.

“He’s playing a bit too heavily on the crescendos,” Wilbur says. A common mistake.

But excluding some needed phrasing shifts, it’s good otherwise. Nothing some lessons and practice can’t smooth out.

He rises and Techno follows suit.

“We’re all learnin’, Wil.”

“Jealous you can’t play the violin that well?”

“A god like me can play the violin *perfectly*.”

~\*~

Wilbur corrects Tommy’s mistakes when they move back into the living room, spending the morning going over technique and musicianship. He somewhat regrets it when Tommy ends up following him around practicing for the entire rest of the day.

“Are you nervous?” Tommy asks quietly. It’s a quiet that somehow suits him, now, a self-assured levelness that would have been surprising once upon a time.

But plenty of people have underestimated Tommy. Wilbur’s not in that category anymore, and he’s never going to be in it again.

“Yes. But I doubt we’ll meet anyone we know personally,” Wilbur says, drawing his coat tighter around himself against the chill. It’s a trenchcoat not unlike the one in Pogtopia, but black leather and hidden pockets. The perceptive eye might catch a flashing sheen running down from just the right angle - the only hint of the protection enchantments Phil has woven in.

“What about you? Are *you* nervous?”

“Well, I’d say TommyInnit never gets fucking nervous...” Tommy looks up to meet Wilbur’s eyes for a moment. Another reassurance, understanding, passes between them. To carry on with something like trust melding the bridge.

“...but I know we’re doing all that - that being *honest* and trusting and stuff. So yeah, I’m a little fucking nervous. No thanks to you, Wil.”

The remark doesn’t sting like it used to. It’s a fact they’ve laid before them - here was Wilbur in L’Manberg. Here was Wilbur in Pogtopia. Here is a man who has done terrible, terrible things to family and to country.

But here is a man who is living nonetheless, and who has to resolve those past atrocities.

Which began with discussions, which will continue with discussions. Apologies, regrets, truth and support.

And - well, other things. Which brings them here.

He and Tommy stand at the ocean harbor of Sanctuary, the sun approaching noon above them. Salted breezes ruffle their hair - Wilbur’s is now long enough to brush over his shoulders in curly brown whorls. Seabirds caw around them, diving through the rippling ocean for food. Every once in a while one comes up with a fish in their long beaks, the prey thrashing in the sunlight with scales glinting.

His legs have healed enough to sustain some amount of walking on his crutches, and Tommy stands close by to help. Any lingering resentment at needing such assistance has long since passed.

Others mill around them, people from the town. Most are walking around, chatting, some settling up stalls and food areas in anticipation.

Just a few days after Tommy and Phil had brought back the guitar, a warm spell had hit the area. The ocean’s ice nearly all melted. And shortly after that, a single note is carried up to their mountain home by a pale white falcon whose wings shimmer with guiding magic.

*A few trading ships have messaged us saying they’re diverging from their usual route to swing by the area for some trade, since the harbor’s now mostly ice-free. The message includes the seal of L’Manberg on it, and probably has more news about the nation. They’ll start arriving sometime tomorrow.*

Which brings them here, with Phil and Techno back at the house.

When Wilbur told them he wanted to go down and check things out, Phil had practically picked him up and carried him out of the house. He *had* fully picked him up outside, to fly him down to the town's edge with Tommy on an elytra close by.

"Might not even be today though," Wilbur says. "The L'Manberg ship could arrive tomorrow. Or the next day. Or-"

"Still foreign ships, Wil," Tommy says. He holds up his satchel, filled with gold and emeralds. "Either way, they'll have cool shit to steal - I mean, buy."

"And information on what's happening across the continent," Wilbur says. "Didn't Scott clarify the latest news they gave you was from early January or something?"

"Yep," Tommy says. Someone brushes past him, a young child with fiery red hair.

"They're here!" she calls. "I see them!"

Wilbur snaps his gaze to the ocean horizon.

The shape of four ships - two the usual wood brown, one with sides painted a golden yellow and the other red - are gliding through the waters, gradually drawing closer.

Wilbur's throat stutters as the blue ship slowly reveals more of its side - to show the rest of the L'Manberg flag, white and red with Xs displayed proudly across its side.

As the ships draw closer, the flags waving atop their masts become clearer as well. A few minutes later they can make out an actual L'Manberg flag waving starkly against the clear day, and-

"Is that the Sparklez Kingdom flag?" Tommy asks, squinting.

"Yeah," Wilbur says, blinking at the golden waves striped with a single line of red. "The others I don't recognize - probably much smaller trading towns, then. This looks like a standard alliance for a trading fleet."

"Makes sense, yeah," Tommy mutters. "If Dream's really going after L'Manberg's navy and trade, sailing with other kingdoms would give more protection. Wonder when the Sparklez Kingdom started allying with the L'Manberg."

"They do border the Dream SMP," Wilbur notes, something fluttering inside of him. Relief, maybe? Tubbo isn't family the way Tommy is, but he is Tommy's best friend and someone whose life he has undoubtedly destroyed with responsibility.

Relief, then. That it's a sign things are working out. If an alliance like this can be made, if a nation as powerful as the Sparklez Kingdom supports L'Manberg, Tubbo will have a chance at maintaining their independence - and perhaps his own sanity.

They stand together on the pier, waiting and watching.

Eventually the ships pull up against the wooden edges, dropping anchors and green-stained ramps. People rush to meet from both sides. Wilbur catches Pearl waving at the ship captain of the Sparklez Kingdom vessel, notebook in hand.

There are several piers along the shore, weathered wood outposts extending into the waters, and the L'Manberg ship is against the next one over to what he and Tommy stand on.

And slowly, they pick their way over.

The wares being unloaded and showcased are what is expected - furs and feathers of creatures not found around here, books by distant authors, tools and trinkets by craftsmen native to specific, faraway areas. Wine, too, various specialty kinds that are a staple of L'Manberg diet. Other crops as well, and much more.

When the smell of a certain strong, pungent plant hits them, Tommy breaks into a fit of giggles.

"Of all the things," he snickers as they observe the activity away from the main traffic, "of all the things they could begin exporting again-"

"Who here is going to buy L'Manberg drugs?" Wilbur asks, blinking as two cratefuls of the weed are displayed almost proudly by the captain, a woman he doesn't recognize.

"They've got some medicinal properties, and uses in potions," someone passing by pauses to say. Wait, that's Lizzie.

"Plus, we have a bunch of pranksters," she adds, sighing before moving on to inspect a table laid with various embroidered cloth pieces.

They stand and watch and comment for a while longer. There is no one among the ship crew or merchants Wilbur knows. Which, well - is to be expected.

And it seems no one recognizes them either. Different clothes, different demeanor, appearances slightly altered. And a lack of expectations.

So the world thinks he's dead? And the President refuses to comment on what happened to Tommy?

Hm.

"See anything you want to buy?" Wilbur finally asks.

"They might have more flower seeds," Tommy says. "Also, I want some of that wine. That's good fucking shit."

Wilbur sighs, rocking back on his crutches a bit.

During the eve of independence, when Dream had signed the peace treaty and L'Manberg was officially recognized, Wilbur had allowed Tommy a few sips of wine at the celebration.

He's had a taste for L'Manberg wine ever since. Nothing anywhere near addiction, thankfully, but an interest in drinking more than what should be allowed for his age. Wilbur had forbidden it in the beginning, though as time slipped past and the presidency sunk its withering roots inside of him he'd grown far more careless in keeping Tommy safe.

Another failure. At least they had no alcohol in Pogtopia.

"Phil and Techno would want some too," Tommy says. "Not that I'm asking permission, mind you. I'm buying either way."

"Techno doesn't even drink." But he takes out the ender chest in its shrunken state, newly emptied of unnecessary items, and follows Tommy to the vendor.

So now they have L'Manberg wine. Great. Fantastic. The value of life, indeed.

“Be glad I’m not buying the drugs too,” Tommy mutters.

After some conversation, Wilbur finds the ships will be docking for at least a week, undergoing mild maintenance as the merchants conduct some business in the town proper as well.

It means news on L'Manberg, which Wilbur isn't quite sure now how much he dreads, can wait until they flag down some merchants at the sole inn in Sanctuary tonight.

For now, then, with no one they recognize after a while of just staring, they move their way through the crowd and pick out some purchases. No point having a giant stash of money if they never use it.

Wilbur buys more cloth, large silk pieces of a higher, newer quality than what Sanctuary's current stores can provide, as well as additional threads and needles for Phil and perhaps Techno to use. Books by various authors, sheet music as well. More waterskins, blank journals and paper, spices and cooking equipment.

Someone offers a globe, mapping the whole of the known world. It's surprisingly accurate and detailed, and Wilbur quickly takes the chance to outbid a few others for it with 15 large emeralds.

That amount of wealth could feed a family for a week, all for a globe. Perks of having a rich father, Wilbur supposes.

Though, he's not being fair here. The intricate lines, the fine craftsmanship, with how the base and golden curve are carved with delicate legend symbols - the globe no doubt took at least a hundred hours to complete, if not more. Probably by more than one person.

He carefully stores it away in the ender chest and looks up to see Tommy setting a giant stuffed moth inside as well.

“Right,” Wilbur says, glancing around from their relatively secluded spot on the pier. “Maybe we should start heading back to town to talk-”

“Hbomb!”

Someone - Scott, actually - shouts the name. A few people glance up from the business before shrugging and turning back.

*Hbomb?*

“Hbomb?” Tommy echoes.

They move towards the source of the noise, which ends up being on the rocky beach, with Scott and another man - or someone who looks vaguely man-shaped, head and hands clearly a green, viscous slime.

This town has a slime... hybrid? Creature? He's sentient in the way Fundy is for sure, gesturing at-  
Oh, there he is.

Hbomb is grinning, eyes light with excitement as he almost bounces before Scott and the other man.

Someone else is also there, figure ridiculously tall - perhaps taller than even Techno. His eyes are red as well, and there's a certain way he stands that's vaguely reminiscent of Techno's stance when awaiting a wave of opponents.

"Oh fuck," Tommy mutters, tugging Wilbur away again. Wilbur shifts his crutches and moves back onto the wooden surface of the pier, thankfully much easier to navigate than a rocky, gravelly shore.

"This isn't good," Tommy says, eyes darting. "Hbomb will recognize us for sure, or at least me - what's he doing here anyway? He's not even part of L'Manberg!"

"He definitely seems to know people in this town," Wilbur notes. Something like a theory pieces its threads in his mind.

Hbomb isn't from L'Manberg, but he's not from the Dream SMP, the kingdom that is Dream's domain, either. He has an accent too indistinct to pin down, and from what Wilbur knows he simply arrived via the trade routes one day and decides to settle in the area for a while.

"You think he's from here?" Tommy asks. "I was wondering why Scott's voice seemed familiar, actually, and their accents do sound alike."

They *do* - now that Tommy's pointed it out, Wilbur can hear it, clear as an even scale.

"What do you think?"

Tommy breaks off with wide eyes as Hbomb turns to stare directly at them.

"Oh, shit," he whispers. "Fucking shit, Wilbur, I think we're in a bit of trouble."

"Yeah," Wilbur manages, looking down to avoid meeting Hbomb's eyes. "I - Tommy, did we ever think through what we'd actually say to anyone who recognized us?"

"I don't think so," Tommy hisses. "Planning ahead was always your thing."

"Fuck."

It had mostly been about who *they* would recognize, and not the other way around. Wilbur hadn't thought they would engage in any conversation.

Except Hbomb is now heading towards them, mysterious companion trailing behind, and it's rather difficult to move fast as a crippled man with crutches.

Tommy tenses as they approach closer, but he understands the futility of trying to escape as well.

Though, he could have simply left Wilbur standing there to confront them alone. Wilbur knows he would deserve it.

Instead they both stand there and await the inevitable. The sky is clear with only a few puffs of clouds today. They float lazily through the wide, carefree expanse, seemingly mocking them.

"...it *is* Tommy!" Hbomb's voice comes into earshot, and he's chattering to Scott and the slime creature along with his companion.

"Hi, Hbomb," Tommy manages, giving him a smile that looks strained through that collider Wilbur had just purchased a while ago.

“Tommy, *this* is where you’ve been the entire time? Do you know how mad Dream was when no one could tell him where you were?” Hbomb rushes forward and tackles Tommy in a tight hug, sending them both stumbling.

Wilbur leans away, mild irritation bubbling up. Since when did Hbomb consider Tommy close enough to randomly give hugs to?

“Get off, H,” Tommy says. Hbomb steps back with a wave.

“Sorry, sorry, got a little carried away. It’s just so good to know you’re - well, alive, you know? Man, there are all these wild, *crazy* rumors about what’s happened to you. What are you doing here all the way on another continent?”

“What are *you* doing here?” Tommy asks, eyebrows lifting.

There’s clearly some established dynamic between them, then. Either formed back during Wilbur’s presidency, when he was too busy to give his brother any amount of attention and Tommy made up for it in other ways, or during that brief period before the battle against Manberg when numerous unexpected allies showed up, Hbomb included.

Probably both.

“I live here! Or I will again - Sanctuary’s my hometown, and when that hot mess with Dream began boilin’ I decided to come back here. Bit too much war for me, you know?”

“This tiny place is your home?” Tommy blinks, questioning.

*A truly bizarre coincidence*, Wilbur thinks.

“Yep!” Hbomb says. “Oh! And I’d like you to say hello to a friend of mine who’s come with me, since the potential war’s turned him away too. This is Ranboo!”

Wilbur looks up at the man besides Hbomb - or is he still a child?

Only one eye is red, he realizes, the other green. His body seems split down two sides - the left all black hair and skin, the other a bleach of white. He wears a simple white undershirt with golden buttons, trousers and boots black as well. A large gray cloak covers his frame, and his hands are gloved - again, one white and one black.

He’s clearly a hybrid of some kind, part enderman and part... ghaſt?

There’s also a crown in his hands. A rare Hypixel champion crown, one of similar make to Techno’s.

So it seems they’re both veterans of that tournament arena.

“Hello,” Ranboo says, voice like a bass.

“Your voice is fucking deep,” Tommy gawks.

“Um - okay? I do get that a lot. People called me discount Technoblade back in Hypixel.”

*Two truly bizarre coincidences*, Wilbur amends in his mind.

“What about you, Tommy?” Hbomb asks. “Who’s your new friend here, and what happened to him?”



Hbomb doesn't recognize him.

It makes sense, he would have said something far sooner if he had, but - *Hbomb doesn't recognize him.*

And, well - it makes sense. Wilbur doesn't think he ever talked to Hbomb, the extent of their interactions being glimpsing each other in Pogtopia and in the battle against L'Manberg. Plus - his hair has grown out, and his clothing is completely different when most people know his image by paintings of him in formal L'Manberg uniforms.

Wilbur would like to think he looks at least somewhat less unhinged now, too. No longer a raving madman anticipating the destruction of an entire nation. His eyes are a dull, shadowed brown, and the edges of his coat rise up to cover his mouth. From Hbomb's shorter angle it would cover a little more as well.

He carefully shifts a crutch against his side and reaches up to those edges, pulling down. Behind Hbomb, he sees Scott double over with silent puffs of laughter.

"Brother, actually," he says.

Hbomb's eyes widen, and so does Ranboo's, whose expression is arguably much funnier with the rapidly disappearing pupils. They both take a step back, and then another, and Hbomb pales like he's seen a ghost.

Which, Wilbur supposes, he has.

"W- Wilbur? "

He gives a small smile in response, dulled edges and soft exhales.

"Yeah," he says. "It seems there's a lot of catching up to do."

## Chapter End Notes

MEMORY BOY IS HERE :D And hbomb too lmao finally some new people from the dsmp crew arrives!! as always, kudos and comments are drugs that feed my dopamine levels

Valley of Serenity has officially become the longest thing I've ever written, 69k words can we get some pogs in the chat

also someone made ART of this and not just any art its art for a BOOK COVER WTF i love this so much???

[art](#) by FeralFoxFire

if anyone has art inspired by this fic share with me on [twitter](#) or [tumblr](#) i would love to see it!!

i reply to comments and write stuff live! Also discuss other dsmp related stuff. [Twitch](#) where I stream.

also, Scott and Pearl aren't OCs, and neither are the other townspeople mentioned. Some people realized this but a lot didn't and I keep forgetting to address it lol. Scott is Smajor1995, the mc youtuber who organizes Minecraft Championships, and Pearl is PearlescentMoon, also a minecraft youtuber. Lizzie is LDshadowlady, ect. Ninja here is TryHardNinja, who provided the vocals for Revenge, Fallen Kingdom, and a ton of other CaptainSparklez's Minecraft songs, and who has a yt channel filled with other music.

# find myself back here again

## Chapter Notes

[discord](#) to get pings for updates/discuss stuff!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Hbomb and Ranboo falter back like dragged puppets, expressions stunned blank for a hovering 1 minute, 15 seconds. Wilbur is counting in the while - it's 18 measures and 3 beats in a smooth larghetto fashion. Broadly slow, yet gliding by in time too ethereal to grasp. A time which exists between the realms of steadfast crawl and leisured walking, a fairytale world of mist and mirrors where reality flutters just out of reach.

Wilbur does not bother to reach for it - the consequences, however necessary, are too much. Or so he claims to himself, but is it not established he is a coward through and through?

Nonetheless, the otherworld haze is eventually pinched out with a stutter from Ranboo. Low, off-tempo staccatos borne of kiltered rhythms. Chord patterns disarrayed to oblivion.

Wilbur is quite the sight, alright. Some broken thing, to live and fight.

He cracks himself up sometimes.

And Hbomb finally gathers enough clarity to muster a response.

"You're *alive*?"

"It appears so," Wilbur hums back.

His breath does not falter. The tempo of his heart - vivacissimo swinging into a terrible, terrifying presto - remains a secret not-beat shuddering away for only him to feel.

Tommy presses closer to him, places a hand on his shoulder like a warm wing curved - a comfort for himself or Wilbur?

It's both. He knows, and his heart reigns itself back just so.

"Uh - let's take this conversation somewhere more comfortable," Scott says. His cheeks are pink and puffy from all the silent laughter - dramatic irony has always been the most entertaining form of humor to audiences.

"Sure," Wilbur says, so pale and plain. But his appearance has always been the most deceiving of them all - his chest is heavy, his legs like thin, crusted sticks washed up on shores unwanted. The winds are darkening with the promise of cold - gripping, revealing, familiar cold.

Too close is also the ocean, drowning with a haziness he still wants to reach for.

But not yet, not with Tommy here. He has to stay. For Tommy.

“Let’s go back to your place then, Scott! I’ll even pay for drinks, since I know you got the good stuff.” Hbomb perks up with a renewed vigor and tugs Ranboo towards the direction of the village. Tommy gives a silent huff, but guides Wilbur along too.

He follows without resistance. Right leg forward, and then the crutch, his left side steadied by gentle hands keeping pressure careful, calculated. It’s a capacity for gentleness Wilbur hasn’t ever felt from Tommy before - a capacity calming with newfound awareness. Something learned from pain and loss and the shedding of childhood.

“Please don’t make a mess,” Scott sighs as he trails after them. “And no, H, I’m not letting you get drunk in my house today.”

The green (slime?) man chuckles, the first sound from him they’ve heard. Like a bored cat, he trails after them with vague interest. Wilbur has no doubt, then, that it won’t last.

“Don’t worry, Scott!” Hbomb chirps. “I won’t come anywhere you don’t want me to-”

Tommy splutters. Wilbur bites back a snort.

Scott groans despairingly.

“Oh gods, why did I *ever* welcome you back?”

~\*~

And now they’re in Scott’s living room. Staring at each other on just the cusp breaking. The other man - Tommy hadn’t even caught his name, he probably should eventually - had taken one look at the situation, rolled his eyes, and seen himself out.

“So, Wilbur. You’re alive.” Hbomb swirls his wine glass, thankfully filled with apple juice instead of whatever monstrosity of a cocktail Tommy has seen him come up with before. The rocking chair he’s on waves the liquid around in higher and higher peaks, only smoothed off by the occasional sip.

“We’ve established that much, yes,” Tommy cuts in dryly.

Hbomb and Ranboo glance at each other, and then at Scott, who gives them a slacked shrug and goes back to burying his face into a gigantic, silver furred pillow from his position on a couch. His eyes are closed, expression half-asleep.

Tommy’s taken a seat on another large couch in the living room, pale pink with tiny rainbows painted into the fur. Wilbur leans against him, warm. Fully warm, and Tommy doesn’t deny the ball of comfort called *safety* diffusing inside of him like he used to.

The feeling is strange. Wilbur is in no position to be defending him, crippled as he is - it’s the other way around, actually. And yet.

Ranboo, once he’s squeezed his considerable height through the door frame, settles onto a large pillow fluffed on the floor. Instead of rainbows or snowflakes, this one is pink with just straight up red hearts. As if to complete the image in a neat piecing of fate, he has also a ring on his left ring finger. It’s a gold band glittering with emeralds so intricately cut Tommy can pick out the shaded surfaces even several feet away.

It seems everything in this house is cheesy or childish to a ridiculous degree.

Tommy is kind of jealous. What he wouldn't give to live like this color scheme - cheerful, welcoming, and with protection around every corner.

"But how?" Ranboo finally says. His gaze is lowered to Wilbur's chest, Tommy notes, but no less bewildered. "I - I thought Wilbur Soot is dead? Everyone told me he died in the explosions."

"That was the plan," Wilbur grimaces. He presses closer to Tommy, just a bit, and Tommy in return traces his finger over a bare hand just recently freed from bandages. "Pure luck I didn't die, quite frankly. It made everything awfully inconvenient."

"But you deserved the inconvenience," Tommy huffs quietly, soft enough only Wilbur's pin-sharp hearing picks it up. "You're not trying to run from us again."

"Okay," Wilbur murmurs. He leans down even closer, until their coats are almost brushing. "I won't."

It sits as another anchor, one of many to the promise they've whispered to each other so many times now.

"Wait - you *wanted* to die?" Ranboo blinks, head tilting. His eyes shift to the left, and then down. At the cast for Wilbur's leg, at the crutches laid against him.

"Yeah, I'm not really followin'," Hbomb adds. Unease tenses in the words, stretched to the point of unnaturalness. As one does when discussing suicide - or not. "Why did you plan for... that?"

*That.*

The question they've grappled with for so long. The pieces are not all there, but the picture has some completion to it. Enough for now, though they'll never stop uncovering its full dimensions.

Wilbur with L'Manberg's ruins before him. Wilbur with the sword, giving Phil the sword. Wilbur with his body splayed and eyes dead as the void.

"Why people usually kill themselves," Wilbur says, face blank. "I didn't think I could stand the pain of living anymore."

It's said so plainly. Everything else, all the oceans worth of pain and terror and nightmares like quicksand drowning - washed over with a simple sentence.

But it's like that. The chasms, the iceberg beneath - it's for him and Techno and Phil to know.

Upon the continuation of Hbomb and Ranboo's stunned silence - punctuated only by the occasional surreptitious sip of tea by an otherwise Scott - Wilbur sighs.

"Take that how you will. I tried to - to die some other ways later, hence all this-" he stops to motion at his injuries, the white bandages and hard casts on his left arm and leg, "-but we know how reliable my plans are."

"Wilbur's not dying," Tommy adds. His smile thins. "Don't try anything dumb, bitches."

Hbomb holds up his hands, eyebrows now raised.

"Look, I'm not goin' into your personal business. I was just confused, okay?" He takes another swig of apple juice. "Promise not to go tellin' anyone."

“So you two are just - living here too?” Ranboo asks.

“Pretty much,” Tommy says. “There’s no green bitch to fuck us around here, you know? Though I would like to go back and punch out his teeth sometime.”

The idea grows increasingly appealing with each new sunrise, actually. Each time the world remakes itself without a care, reminds him of its wonderful vastness.

Fuck, he really *has* been spending too much time around Techno.

*One day, he reminds himself. One day I'll go back for a bit. Punch Dream and hug Tubbo. Maybe once his presidency term is over.*

If L’Manberg is still a democracy by then - or actually, L’Manberg was never really a democracy in the first place. Tubbo might be leader for life, especially with no end in sight for his precarious situation - and isn’t that just a horrible idea for the both of them?

“So, Ranboo,” Wilbur says. His eyes dart down to something at Ranboo’s side for a moment, before rising up to rest just above eye level. “Tell us a bit about yourself.”

No one calls him out on the subject shift.

“O-oh!” Ranboo slides back a bit. Clawed fingers jitter against each other in tiny clacks. “I’m - my name is Ranboo.”

“Hi, Ranboo,” Tommy says. “My name is Tommy.”

“I - uh. I know that?”

Tommy gives him an unimpressed look.

“Ah. Point taken.”

“...”

“I used to work for L’Manberg’s government? In the cabinet?”

“You did?” Wilbur asks like he’s responding to a friend’s exaggerated vacation summary. He presses against Tommy with a quiet exhale. “Because not only are you a Hypixel native, you are a Hypixel native who sounds like he’s never been away from Hypixel his entire life.”

Hbomb makes a tiny, accented cough.

“I - well, I wasn’t part of the government until recently,” Ranboo says. “Like - I think it was three weeks after the whole... explosions thing. Yeah.” His fingers twitch, as though itching for some phantom weight between them.

Tommy turns to Wilbur with a frown, and finds Wilbur has done the same.

They’re both past caring for L’Manberg, at least in any meaningful way. But they have friends - and family - there, and that means its events still have some reason for concern. Especially if Tubbo’s insistent on throwing his own self-preservation into the grinder.

“Don’t get me wrong, Ranboo - you seem like a nice guy,” Tommy begins. Ranboo stiffens like he’s been stabbed with a needle full of acid, slitted eyes blasting wide in a shower of black-purple veins. A low, buzzed *vwoop* escapes from his lips before a hand slaps it short.

Fucking weirdo. Not that Tommy can really judge.

“But it’s kind of hard to believe Tubbo would just allow a foreigner onto his cabinet,” he continues.

“Unless it wasn’t Tubbo,” Wilbur murmurs, tilting his head. Those calculations are back, in the same manner Techno clocks away at his thoughts - observing, connecting, predicting.

But not planning. Because he knows better, and if he doesn’t Tommy will be here to remind him.

“It was,” Hbomb and Ranboo say at the same time.

“I’m - I was a special case,” Ranboo adds. “It’s complicated.”

“Was the green bitch involved?” Tommy asks. “’cause I can’t think of any other reason - well, I can, but that’s the main one.”

“Dream - Dream didn’t want me on the cabinet. Just so you know. And my main job was just carrying messages anyway!”

“And that’s enough to promote you to the cabinet?”

“Well, I - I really shouldn’t say anymore than that. It wasn’t - yeah. I shouldn’t say more.”

“I think he’s clammed up,” Wilbur murmurs to Tommy. He hums a valleyed 5-note theme and leans forward. “What about L’Manberg then? Are they still a functioning place?”

“Last I checked, yep,” Hbomb says. “They’re doing better, actually - Tubbo got some treaties with the Sparklez Kingdom worked out for trade protection, as you can see, and also with Hypixel as well. I’m not sure on the details but I know it has something to with helping them deal with the Dream problem.”

“Oh?”

Oh indeed. Hypixel is notoriously neutral in their affairs, all treaties historically centered around non-interference. How did Tubbo convince them to make an alliance? Against the *Dream SMP* of all places?

“I know,” Ranboo laughs, a nervous and crickety sound. “It’s so strange.”

Tommy gives another unimpressed look. Ranboo promptly falls silent, legs shifting out in two spindly shapes.

“Tubbo better be careful,” Wilbur says slowly. “L’Manberg is much smaller than the Sparklez Kingdom. If King Jordan decides L’Manberg would be better used as a servant than a partner, the Dream SMP no longer becomes the biggest threat. Hypixel might become a problem too.”

“I mean - it’s worked out so far,” Hbomb says.

“A few months proves *nothing*. ”

“We don’t give a fuck about L’Manberg though,” Tommy interrupts. He scowls in the direction of Hbomb’s surprised “You don’t?” and continues. “Tubbo, however, is a fucking idiot who wouldn’t understand self-preservation if it slapped him in the face with an invisibility potion. So do you think he’s gonna get himself stabbed?”

“Um - probably not?”

“Give me a real fucking answer, Ranboo.”

“No one’s sprung up in open rebellion as far as I know,” Hbomb offers. “I mean - people aren’t exactly singing his praises, ‘specially since he wasn’t elected, but I think he’s doin’ a decent enough job for now.”

“Everyone’s so testy over the Dream problem though,” Ranboo sighs. “And Dream - it’s like - I kind of hate his guts.”

“Personally?” Tommy asks, practically *confirms*. Because if there’s someone in the world who would understand that sour undertone dripping from the way he said Dream’s name, it would be him.

“Personally.” There it is.

“Welcome to the club,” Wilbur mutters.

“Great.” Ranboo pauses, and then perks up. “Oh, Wilbur! About your son! Fundy’s actually taking the vice president role well. Better than Tubbo’s taking the presidency. I mean, like - mental health wise, that is. Don’t get me wrong, no one works as hard as Tubbo in the government.”

“Fundy’s-” Wilbur frowns. “He’s not my son. Anymore.”

“...oh.”

“Kinda obvious after the whole disowning each other thing, and then - uh. Literally blowing up a whole country,” Tommy points out.

“You two *disowned* each other?” Hbomb asks. “What? When?”

“This was back during the whole exile thing,” Wilbur shrugs. “We never took it back, and I think even if we did it wouldn’t have meant anything.”

He pauses and adds, quieter; “for what it’s worth, Fundy’s not my biological child. He looked 12 when I adopted him shortly before arriving in the Dream SMP. I didn’t realize he would age faster than normal humans.”

*So it goes*, Tommy thinks, some hint of bitterness returning to coat his already soured throat. *For what it’s worth*.

None of them are Phil’s biological children either. From one legacy to another - and which one is more corrupted?

“So.” Ranboo clears his throat. “I mean - Tubbo’s also doing decent though! I think his policies aren’t terrible. Like, uh - no one’s perfect. But we’re - um. He’s trying.”

“Sounds like you know each other well,” Wilbur says. Tommy can’t help but admire how fast he sheds all trace of grief from his expression and latches after the newly offered topic.



“We’re - um. We know each other.”

And yeah, Ranboo is sounding more and more suspicious by the minute. And not even in a “I will backstab you” kind of way, but just a general “I have secrets I really don’t want you to know because you probably won’t take it very well” kind of way.

Which is not ideal. Not at all - but it’s not like they can just threaten everything out of him.

Well, Tommy supposes they technically can. But not only would their already fragile reputation around here crash into flames, Ranboo can also retaliate back by making their location public.

They could just kill him and Hbomb too afterwards, actually, and frame it as an accident. But that would be too dick a move even for Tommy. So, no threatening people for now.

“Cool,” he says instead, dragging out the syllable in a scrape of teeth that makes Ranboo flinch. “Anyway, so you think L’Manberg’s doing better?”

“Yeah,” Ranboo says.

“Then why are you here?” Might as well started how.

“Oh, that’s. Well. I - Dream couldn’t really - I was still nervous. Yeah. It’s just for a while.”

“Cabinet work isn’t really for Ranboo,” Hbomb says. “And I don’t blame him! All that paperwork.”

He shudders.

“So Ranboo was involved in the treaty with Hypixel,” Wilbur says. His eyes glitter dark, searching.

“Well...” The owl-in-the-torchlight look Ranboo has is, quite frankly, the most hilarious thing Tommy’s encountered since Tubbo admitted he had once used pregnancy as an excuse to leave during his tenure as spy. “I was - yeah. Involved. Mhm.”

“And you’re not supposed to be here, are you?” Wilbur says.

“Weeeell - I mean. If people knew I was here that would be. Not - uh. Not too good, but it’s like - um. Like.”

“Chill out,” Tommy snorts. His throat scratches at the words for some reason, so he reaches down and actually takes a sip of his water. “Plenty of people want Wilbur dead, so we’ll keep our mouths shut if you keep yours. If you catch my drift.”

“Oh - oh. Cool.” Ranboo’s extensive shifting has nearly toppled him out of the pillow seat. He claws himself back into a secure position and bunches his legs beneath his chin. Claws run down a lump from a pocket in his cloak - a rectangular shape, edges curved.

“Yep! Very cool,” Hbomb says, nodding a bit too fast.

“Does Tubbo even know you’re here?” Tommy asks.

“Y - yeah! He, uh. He said it was fine. And all that.”

Suspicious to the end, but then again, who is Tommy to judge if Ranboo had simply ran off? Left Tubbo behind to the miserable clutches of politics?

Oh, fucking gods. Tubbo. Great.

He really doesn't want to go back down this path today. Because he's just - fuck. Tubbo had told him to go, had said it would be better for him - and he's right, isn't he? Tommy hasn't felt this - not *good*, but maybe... satisfied? Satisfied, yeah.

He hasn't felt this satisfied with life in a while. It's not the complete satisfaction of everything gone right, done right, but instead the reassuring hum of stability. No one is out to stab his back from the nocturne darkness, and nothing crawls in the waking world to corrupt his veins black as ash and obsidian.

He can work with this. He can live like this. But he doesn't *want* to, not fully, not when there's still so much missing.

Like Tubbo. And fuck, he wants to talk to Tubbo again.

"I think we're done for the day," Tommy says, nudging Wilbur up. It takes a few moments for them to steady - crutches splayed, feet light against the ground.

"Um - sure?"

"You're leaving so soon? To where?" Hbomb leans forward with a frown, but doesn't get off his seat. Scott raises his head from the pillow for a brief moment, eyes glazed and blinking a few hanging seconds before slumping back down again.

"We'll talk more later, since you're presumably staying around," Wilbur says as they cross over the doorway. His hand squeezes Tommy's for a moment, warm and with a trembling tightness almost exactly like how he had done so when they were five years younger and Tommy still clung to his shoulders with the fears of a child. When Tommy would give back a watery smile and even tighter grip, refusing to let go until he could no longer hear the erratic beating of his own heart.

And just like then, he finds himself squeezing back. For just a moment - and then he lets go, and Wilbur lets out a soft sigh.

"We have an hour to kill before Phil comes down," he says when they're a decent distance from Scott's house, the people of Sanctuary for once paying more attention to others - the traders - than them. "What do you think?"

Tommy hums, valleyed 5-note tune. Wilbur's casted arm presses against him.

He's not happy, exactly. Not in his overall state of life. But he's satisfied for now, and he knows the path set forth.

"Trade crews that large usually have onboard doctors," he says. "Should probably ask for some other opinions on your injuries."

Wilbur gestures for him to lead the way.

Wilbur: tries to hug tommy without actually hugging tommy

Tommy: aha I see through your deviously secretive machinations

lots of foreshadowing in this one, hehe

someone made a [FUCKING ANIMATIC](#) of this fic oh my god pls go watch and show it love its soooooo good

also hello yes, I am alive and back and this story is updating regularly again! hooray!! maybe with another tiny blip because AP exams are coming up but I only have one and it's AP World so it should be easy so,,, we'll see?? Another chapter should be coming a day or two :D

the reason this hadn't updated in nearly a month is because I got really into writing Into the Night, another au fic of mine exploring the implications of dying again and again for Tommy through a superpower au which, for once, doesn't focus on vigilantes, heroes, and villains. superpowers is such a cool trope which i feel would be used in a lot more creative (worldbuilding!) ways than just that, so that was also a motivation of mine. if you enjoy the character interactions/relations or the worldbuilding of Valley of Serenity, do give Into the Night a try if you haven't already! It's fully finished so you won't be despairing over with a cliffhanger (not even literally! :D)

anyway so im back here now! I also do have several other fic ideas I work to work out (including an alternate Tubbo and Ranboo pov in the same au as this fic), but Valley of Serenity will be my main focus for a while, so stick around for much more frequent updates! Especially since there will eventually be Actual Plot lmao.

i reply to comments lives! [twitch](#)

[tumblr](#) and [twitter](#) for questions and art!

## through memories tried and true

### Chapter Notes

[discord](#) to get pings for updates/discuss stuff!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“And you said it’s healed this far after...”

“Two months,” Tommy confirms.

“Two months, hm.” The doctor taps the cast with her metal stick one last time. Then she jolts something down on a small white notebook. “I’m afraid your brother is right - that leg will heal crooked no matter what you do. With proper physical exercise and medication, however, you will be able to mitigate how bad the eventual limp is.”

“But it’ll still be *bad*, won’t it?” Wilbur asks. The idea is, actually, not as terrifying as it might have once seemed.

Well, having a permanent limp will be quite awful, obviously. But even when he’s not yearning for the cliffs again, Wilbur finds he doesn’t feel much pain in the idea.

And confirmation that his arm will heal right means his guitar is within reach. What swordfights will he be engaging in on the mountain’s wilderness anyway?

His mind has always been his greatest asset. Techno excels in everything, perfect son he is, but Wilbur has only this singular solace and at least for now it’s been left untouched.

“I’m afraid yes,” the doctor continues. “Even in the best case scenario you would be advised to keep some walking assistance tool for anywhere that’s not a completely flat plain.”

“Sure,” Wilbur says. He already has his crutches, so he might as well keep using those. Maybe when his other arm heals he could make do with a cane?

“*Wilbur*,” Tommy says, expression almost aghast. The doctor glances up with a look of mild surprise.

Wilbur blinks.

“What?”

“You’re gonna - this - you’re just *fine* with this? With a bad limp for the rest of your life?”

Oh. Tommy’s upset now. That’s not good - Wilbur would much rather his brother be not upset. When he’s upset it usually means something terrible wrong is going on, especially nowadays.

He delivers his response measured, and honest. At least he can do that.

“How I react won’t anything,” he points out. “Besides, it’s not like my hobbies revolve around stabbing everything I can.”

Tommy rolls his eyes, but that undercurrent of distress is still there in the way he clutches his own shoulder a bit too tightly, too quickly.

Wilbur manages a smile for him and hopes it's enough. He's not sure he has the energy for anything else.

That conversation with Hbomb and Ranboo was - he doesn't even know. Informative, for sure. If there's one thing he would be upset at right now it would be whatever Dream's doing, really, but again - he's past clinging to L'Manberg's shadows now. He has to be. His family would be so upset otherwise, and rightfully so because-

"What about Notch apples?" Tommy suddenly asks, shoving himself so close to the doctor the poor soul almost falls off her bench.

"We've tried that," Wilbur reminds him. "When you first brought me back to the house. After the first 3 it didn't do much."

"But what about even more?"

"Notch apples will speed up the healing process and possibly lessen the eventual limp, but it gives diminishing returns," the doctor says, frowning. "If you *have* any-"

And the skepticism is wound through every word, like she's lecturing them on a purely hypothetical - which Wilbur doesn't blame her for.

"-then I'd advise no more than one every week at this stage, in case the body heals so fast muscle and fat get tangled with the bone. Which has happened before."

"Guess what you're having for dessert after dinner?" Tommy pokes Wilbur lightly in the ribs, earning a small shove back.

But. It's not just joking.

"Do we really need to?" Wilbur asks. "I'll still heal without it, and we only have so much."

He's actually not sure how many Notch apples they have. Techno held around 5, last he checked, and Phil probably a few more than that. They're called one of the rarest resources in the world for a reason.

He's been practically force-fed 3 already. They can't afford to dwindle their supply too much for this, in case someone else gets hurt and-

"The sooner you're off those casts the better," Tommy immediately dismisses. "It should be another month, right?"

"With potions, good sleep and diet, and exercise, yes," the doctor nods. "Possibly two more months until everything is completely back to normal function - as normal as it'll ever get, anyways. But if you apply Notch apples then the entire time should shorten considerably to 5 weeks or so."

"Cool," Tommy says. He flicks out a large gold coin and slides it over the table counter. "Thanks for your - ah - counsel, doctor. My brother and I will be going now."

"Have a good day, and I wish you a speedy recovery," she says, frown never leaving her lips as Tommy drags him out. Perhaps she feels that same nagging recognition so many others? Wilbur never

even caught her name, Tommy having barged into her ship's office so suddenly.

Oh well.

When Phil picks them up from the forest's edge, shuffles Wilbur carefully in his arms and asks how the trip went, they'll both chorus that it was all perfectly fine and share knowing looks that make their father sigh, slow and fond, before raising his wings and flying them back home.

~\*~

"Eat the fucking apple, Wilbur," Tommy says with the same aggressiveness he had employed when they were trying to knock sense into Wilbur back when they first found him in Scott's house, newly survived and eyes still so clouded. Skin still patched so cold.

It doesn't catch Techno off guard this time. They should probably stop underestimating Tommy, even in matters such as this.

Wilbur stares at the apple like it's some incomprehensible puzzle for another minute or so, but to his credit he doesn't protest before eventually taking a bite.

And then another. With a wince as well, which Techno understands. Its effects are almost godly for a short while, but the taste is horribly bitter with a texture like rubbery molasses. Not exactly pleasant to *eat*.

Wilbur finishes the apple in a few minutes, core and all, which also holds no seeds but plenty of incredibly tough fiber.

"Well, there we go," Phil says when it's done. He reaches hugs Wilbur tight for a moment before settling back onto their couch. Tommy joins him with a self-satisfied look, begins picking at Phil's wing feathers.

Techno, hesitantly, slides into his seat on the rocking chair. A new book is in his lap: *The History and Treatise of Potato Agriculture* by Novixl's Eastern Farmers' Association. 10th edition. Wilbur has picked up a few more books as well, now piled on the bookshelf in their room.

"So what I gather about that conversation you two had with Hbomb and... *Ranboo*," Phil eventually says, slicing down the silence, "is that L'Manberg is doing surprisingly better than people thought it would?"

"Yep." Tommy pops the p, and drapes himself further beneath Phil's wings. They twitch back and curve to cover his body. "Ranboo's suspicious though - especially with whatever the fuck's going on between him and Tubbo. He and Hbomb aren't telling us something."

"Might have to do with why he's here," Techno shrugs. The entire situation is a fascinating study, actually - he can already see it printing history's pages full of connections, strategies, lessons. L'Manberg has no personal value to him now, but perhaps it'll serve as a good philosophical study?

They'll have to learn more to be sure of anything, though. So, one day. One day he might go back and take some notes.

"Do you want to return to him?" Wilbur asks.

*Wait, who's "him?"* Techno frowns, fingers tightening around a page.

“Tubbo?” Tommy asks, suddenly quiet.

Oh.

“Yeah.”

A moment. And then another. And then-

“Someday,” Tommy adds quickly. “But it’ll probably have to be in L’Manberg.”

And there’s the ultimate question, isn’t it?

“I’m not opposed to going back there one day,” Techno says. He might as well get this out of the way early.

And sure enough, half the tension drains out Tommy’s shoulders. Phil and Wilbur give him questioning looks, almost identical.

Techno has to bite back a huff of laughter. They really are Phil’s sons, in the end. He doubts anything can change that now.

*Hopefully. Please let it be true.*

“I don’t have this personal vendetta against L’Manberg itself or something,” he shrugs. “It’s a country. Or a piece of land. But it’s not inherently worse than any other place.”

That’s not how countries work, after all. That’s not how *people* work. Of course, L’Manberg also nearly took both his brothers away from him, so Techno still has *some* bias.

“It’ll - it’ll be a while though, wouldn’t it?” Wilbur asks. “Until we leave this place. Or at least go anywhere far from here.”

Is that... nervousness? At the idea of facing what he’s done to the country, or what the people will say to him?

Probably the latter, if Techno has to guess. But his presence will be more than enough protection for Wilbur. It has to be.

“That’s what I’ve planned, yeah,” Phil says. “Unless any of you have objections?”

“Not really,” Tommy exhales. “Just - nothing concrete, okay? Take things one step at a time.”

“One step at a time,” Wilbur agrees.

Techno finds himself nodding - and then almost stops at the realization. When did he begin sliding into agreement so easily?

And when did it begin feeling so safe to do? To slide down his guards, his filters, and nods along softly to the flow of his family’s conversation?

“But you do miss Tubbo,” Wilbur then adds, gaze arched straight at Tommy.

“Do we really have to-”

“You made me eat the apple, so you have to get better at something too.”

“Fuck you.”

“So. Tubbo.”

Oh dear. *Tubbo*.

Quite frankly, Techno shares Tommy’s sentiment of wanting to avoid the topic, if for entirely different reasons.

“I miss him, but I’m not gonna go flying off in the middle of the night or something,” Tommy groans. “I thought we established this, like - I don’t know, months ago!”

“But we’re not really - that’s not the problem,” Wilbur sighs. “The thing is - the Tubbo you’ll eventually meet will be completely different from the Tubbo you left, just like you’ll be completely different to him. Are you willing to accept that? To keep an open mind about it?”

Tommy shuts his mouth and turns to grasp tightly onto the base of Phil’s wings. Phil has to turn awkwardly to support the movement - but he combs fingers down Tommy’s back and lets out a few low hums.

Techno, inexplicably, unexplainably, wants to be there with them.

He then squeezes that impulse dead with a mortified feeling, and hugs the book close to his chest.

Gods, what is he thinking?

“I don’t really have a choice, do I?” Tommy finally says. “Experiences change people, presidency isn’t exactly a job for angels, yeah yeah.”

He purses his lips, hunches down, and lets go of Phil.

“I’ll think about this later,” he mutters. “Not now, though.”

“We’ve bullied you enough for the night,” Techno agrees.

Wilbur and Tommy shoot him identical dark looks, clearly aware of his admittedly pathetic ploy at escape. Techno gives them both a pleading expression back.

Thankfully, from sympathy or tiredness, neither pursue that trail.

Instead they settle into silence once more, and then Phil yawns and declares he’s going to sleep, and Tommy follows him-

And it’s just him and Wilbur now. Here, in the living room. Alone.

“We should go to bed soon,” Wilbur says as Techno flips a page. He looks up in response.

“Alright. But I’m keeping a candle lit, since I won’t be falling asleep for another few hours anyway,” he says.

Wilbur tilts his head, something like concern tugging at the almost clock-like movement.

“You know, Techno, that’s not really healthy. And if I have to sleep then you should too.”

“But I can’t,” Techno argues. He frowns, closing the book.



Sleep is something that's long since eluded him. He catches drifts here and there - two or three hours a night. The occasional nap. There have even been a few times where he went into a sort of hibernation, not waking for weeks - probably something about his piglin nature clashing with the Overworld's environment.

But consistent, steady sleep, something which he knows should be a requirement for him - Techno still cannot attain. It's a battle he's not won yet.

Or, actually, it's a battle he's long since given up fighting.

"Keep trying," Wilbur says. Lines crease beneath his eyes as they're narrowed. "I'll sing you to sleep or something. It's worked before."

Techno considers the merit of fighting that idea - but really, what does he have to lose? More time to read, write, plan, that can simply be delegated into the endless void of time stretching out before them?

Some uneasiness curls inside of him still at the idea. To just lie down, lay his back bare, allow anything to happen while he slumbers away. The Blood God is always alert, always ready, always on guard.

Wilbur seems to catch on, ever perceptive. So much more than Techno could hope to be.

"What do you think might happen in the middle of the night?" he asks. "Tommy sleepwalks himself into the ocean?"

Techno bites his lower lip, leaning back.

"Phil will watch me if we ask him to," Wilbur presses on. "Actually, I'll go get him if you don't."

It's this last point that does it. They're not leaving Wilbur alone and awake in the night - and if Phil's keeping vigil anyway, Techno would rather not be at the end of a scolding. No doubt he'll take Wilbur's side.

That Phil would still *scold* them for not sleeping, two grown men broken with war and unheld promises, is a ridiculous notion all by itself. But it's true and somehow, it feels right - and what does that say about how much they've really grown up? Techno latches onto that train of thought as he quietly pushes their bedroom door open, walks in, and almost collapses onto his mattress.

Coolness surrounds him like a plunge into the ocean, drifting between hazy dreamland seasons. Soft and sinking beneath him just right. Waves carrying his conscience onto journeys rediscovered.

Wait. He can't. Wilbur's still there.

Nausea - heaving, painful nausea - wells up inside of him. Techno scrabbles into a seated position with a gasp just in time to see Wilbur limp in the room, Phil following with half-lidded eyes.

"Go back to sleep," Phil tells him before even Wilbur can make the reprimand.

"I can't," Techno protests. Why that is, he's not sure now.

Phil opens his mouth again, seeming ready to argue - before simply frowning and dragging over a chair to seat himself on. His eyes are closed for a long moment, before speaking again.

“Please try, Techno,” he finally says. “It would - you’ll feel better with more sleep.”

Techno blinks. He was expecting - he doesn’t even know. An order? For Phil to command, beg, or fuss over the idea like he has done so much in the distant childhood past?

But that’s not really how things go around here now, is it? No matter their past, they all hold the capacity of grown adults - and that even includes Tommy to some degree, given what he’s been through. Phil understands this, has had several months to get used to it.

They’re on equal ground here. Techno’s always seen Phil as a superior authority, *the* superior authority, towering large and all-encompassing in his wisdom - but it’s been a long time since that’s the case. It can’t be the case anymore.

And suddenly, some burn of shame floods him. Is he - that’s why Tommy’s realized, isn’t it? And reacting accordingly, by negotiating things on his own terms. Even Wilbur - he participates in discussions of their future ever more frequently, and with a perspective beyond what only Phil would order.

Has Techno really been the only one to - to make this a conscious realization now? He’s supposed to be the mature one, nevermind that Wilbur’s older. He’s the protector, strategist, ever alert - and yet. And yet.

Change is inevitable, and those who do not adapt are usually the first to sink beneath its waves. Techno knows he is absolutely atrocious at adapting.

His wide skillset has floated him through for now. But for how much longer? This - his family, glued back together with bonds so fragile, ready to reframe at even the hint of secrets, the burn of scorn - how much longer can he keep this up, propped with flimsy excuses and thoughtless trudging?

Could he be the one to shatter them again? The destroyer, the blood god, the *blade*?

“I - okay,” he says, mouth suddenly dry as dynamite tinder. Phil and Wilbur glance slight frowns at each other, clearly expecting more resistance - which again, is the last thing Techno wants right now. To cause more worry for everyone else.

He shifts down beneath his blankets, nightclothes pressing soft against his skin, and closes his eyes. Tries to beckon the yawning darkness back into his mind, to encompass him, to loosen down everything and sweep him away.

He doesn’t succeed. The darkness pulls away, mocking.

How does one induce sleep anyway?

Every tiny prick of fur, the waving seas of them, magnifies a thousandfold in their intensity against Techno’s skin. It’s reflected in every singular itch across his scalp where hair kneads its way through skin.

All the wind’s whistles a stray arrow ready to shatter glass, each flickering candlelight ready to tip over any moment-

And then, Wilbur begins to sing.

*“Sheathe your sword and fly away with me*

*To a world where tyranny's a dream*

*Where every blossom in the streams*

*And every feather in the skies*

*Hums a tune of wonder as time flies."*

It's - it's nice. Beautiful. The melody salving mangled, broken things, as Wilbur's singing has always done.

Techno's forgotten how much he misses it, actually.

*"As the dawning meets the day*

*And the valleys now awake*

*Through memories tried and true*

*We will find our way back home*

*To you."*

He wonders how long the lyrics have been in the works. It's not exactly a lullaby - but it has the qualities, somehow. It works.

And Wilbur is soothing him to sleep for the first time since they've arrived here, and not the other way around. When has that last happened?

In childhood, for sure. Before Techno has truly left the nest. When they were still undeniably, unbreakably, brothers. That's the last tangible thought Techno finds wisped behind his eyes before further waves of music wash him into the depthless ocean that is sleep.

~\*~

Admittedly, they've been slacking in the whole "building" department, though in their defense there's not much that's really *necessary*. With regular enough trips down to Sanctuary they've got pretty much everything they'll need for a comfortable existence.

But of course, this is the same group of people who have started nations, led wars, swayed thousands with their visions and fought ferociously for victory where others would have fainted in complete terror upon the path's first bloody step. And so it is not a matter of whether they'll go beyond, but instead *how*.

First order of business is the horses. After piling up hay bought from Sanctuary in the makeshift stable, they reinforce the walls and make sure the area where it connects to the cave is completely leak-proof. It's been a long time coming, to be honest.

Quite frankly, Phil's not sure the horses are even worth keeping. They were a means of transport from the port city they arrived at to the mountains, but they've simply been cooped around the area all winter. Maybe he could get a good deal for them in the town.

That's a topic for another day, though. They also expand the fish pond (catching and dumping a few more fish inside in the process, considering most of them didn't survive the winter), and dig more

water channels from the nearby stream.

Then, there's crops.

With spring arriving and Wilbur healed (and trusted) enough to hobble around on his own, it's about time they begin farming.

Of course, they don't really need to - but why not? Phil is a famous survivalist, and it's carried over to his children - all of them.

Techno leads the drive for the incredibly exciting task of tilling dirt. Their fenced area holds enough space for now, and hoes quickly claw through rough ground that fountains in loose, dry chunks with each hit.

"We'll need some compost," Phil comments as he digs up yet another stone. This one's pale red and the size of his hand outstretched, speckled red and dull as chalk. He kicks it away.

"No shit," Tommy says. "I doubt strawberries are growing in this kind of sorry soil. It's gritty as fucking - I don't know, Dream's hair or some shit like that."

"You're never seen Dream's hair," Phil says. "Let alone *felt* it. Or at least, I hope you haven't."

"No. But I bet that bastard has the grittiest, greasiest hair anyone's ever had the misfortune of having, and he fucking deserves it--"

"I've seen Dream's hair," Techno chimes in.

Tommy whirls to him incredulously. Phil has to snort back a laugh at the sheer disbelief coalescing around his dropped jaw.

"*When?*" he demands. "He's always got his - his stupid green hoodie-cloak thing on."

"At the duel," Techno says. "I managed to slice the hood away. It's this bright blond color--"

He breaks off, eyes squinting into Tommy with a dawning look of realization that Phil recognizes all too well.

"His hair looks exactly like yours, actually. Same fluffy texture too."

"What that *fuck*," Tommy splutters. "Don't compare me to him! I look nothing like - like--"

"You don't know what he looks like though," Wilbur chimes in.

Phil blinks - how did he get here so fast? With those crutches too?

Well, it's a good thing at least, right? If he has more mobility?

"But according to Techno," Tommy huffs, "apparently, Dream looks like *me*. Like just - what the fuck."

"Dream's hair looks like yours," Techno corrects. "We don't know about the rest of him."

"I can hear the smirk in your stupid fucking voice! You *totally* think--"

"I don't."

“You do!”

Phil rolls his eyes and lets the squabbling wash over him, turning back to the ground.

A stray beetle crawls over his boots, shell black and gleaming iridescent in drops of sunlight. With a quick flick, it’s clattering into a nearby patch of grass.

Hoeing the ground is tedious and labor intensive. Phil’s somewhat ashamed to admit that he’s gotten lazy with manual labor in the past few years, focusing more on automation as he sits comfortably on his piles of resources. Maybe he could work up something to harness the horses for?

“Is there anything I can help with?” Wilbur asks, suddenly. He’s a little ways away from the rest of them, unable to risk traversing loose dirt with his crutches. Tiny pine needles scatter in his hair in crowning patterns.

“Maybe try to keep Tommy and Techno somewhat productive,” Phil laughs, raking his hoe into the dirt again. This time the ground gives way like tearing flesh, which is - a strange comparison, but accurate.

He’s killed people with hoes before. He would know.

Phil wonders if Tommy would like to try it sometime. Maybe that’s something else to teach him - hoes are surprisingly useful weapons, after all. All the places he can aim- the heart, the stomach, the neck, straight through the eyes and into the brain’s central nervous system. It’s a good way to defend oneself in a pinch.

“Phil!”

“Yeah?” It’s Techno who’s called this time. His area of the ground is done already, freshly broken and probably just needing some fresh water and seeds.

“Tommy’s making fun of my aspirations-”

“They’re dumb! And who calls them ‘aspirations’?”

What? Phil moves over to Techno and Tommy glaring at each other with, quite frankly, rather comical expressions of annoyance. Wilbur’s hovering to the side, expression pinched like he’s trying extremely hard to not laugh.

“Would you rather I call them dreams?” Techno challenges.

“I don’t care, actually! I’m not scared of a word.”

“Just like you’re also not scared of being compared to-”

“Alright,” Phil interrupts. He can see where this is going - another one of their long, mock arguments over the most meaningless of topics.

Good gods, how do they manage to keep them up for so long?

*At least they’re not arguing for real,* he reminds himself. *They’re brothers, it’s what they do.*

He does wish his ears will get a break sometime, though.

“What did I get called here for again?” he asks instead.

“I wanted to let you know,” Techno begins - and then falls silent. He stares down at his own hoe of shimmering netherite for a long moment.

Oh dear. Techno has had this look before - just before he told Phil he would be leaving home to fight in Hypixel’s arenas, for one. Or when he asked Phil to join the Antarctic Empire. Or when he said he was chasing after the number 1 spot in some world record potato farming contest.

“It’s okay, Techno,” Phil exhales. “Your project ideas are usually - well. They usually work out really well.”

Too well, maybe.

“Whether or not they’re good ideas are always debatable though,” Wilbur says.

“Thanks a lot for the vote of confidence,” Techno mutters, still shuffling his feet. “I - uh.”

“I promise not to judge,” Phil says, trying to sound as gentle as possible. Though honestly, he’s not quite sure how well that succeeded, because he’s also trying not to laugh at the same time.

In his defense, given Techno’s previous track record...

“I will totally judge,” Tommy scoffs. Techno rolls his eyes.

“I’m writing a book,” he finally says.

They’re all silent for a moment. Wilbur takes a step closer, a crutch now planted just a few inches away from their bed of tilled soil. Phil shifts a wing out in his direction.

“Techno,” Wilbur says after a minute. “You’ve written books before. You’re an established author.”

“*This* is what you were so worked up about telling us?” Tommy asks. He nudges Techno’s side, giggling when he receives a scowl back. “Really?”

“It’s not a - it’s going to be nonfiction this time,” Techno says. “About - uh. It’ll be about potatoes.”

Phil wonders how many suspended silences they can possibly fit in a single conversation. It’s not silence filled surprise, not even the kind where expectations are subverted in some terrible “chicken crosses the road” kind of way. Because quite frankly, they *shouldn’t* be surprised.

And he’s not, not really. But still.

“*Why?*” is the first word out of Phil’s mouth.

“I though you were over that phase,” Wilbur says.

“It’s not a *phase*, Wil! I just - I finished that book you got me about potato farming-”

“You actually read the whole thing?” Wilbur throws his head back and laughs, a cackling, spirit-tinged sound. Phil finds himself gaping at bit at that too - when was the last time Wilbur expressed himself so carefreely like this?

“Techno, Techno. *Brother dearest* - I got you that book as a joke!”

“How?” Techno asks. He’s genuinely befuddled, Phil realizes.

Oh. Another thing they’ve all forgotten over the years. However perfect Techno seems to the world, larger than life and legend, he’s just... a person. One who has trouble grasping the intent of others. And isn’t - isn’t that why there are now still so many strided minefields laying between him and Tommy? Him and Wilbur, too?

Phil has to keep that train of thought to himself for now. But it’s a reminder there’s still so much to work for, despite how far things have come now.

“You know more than those people ever will about potatoes,” Wilbur says. He pauses, and probably has some similar train of thought to Phil’s, because he goes on with a clarification. “It’s like a trophy - the book claims it’s the definitive, standard guide, yeah? So you can look at it and feel good about knowing better or something.”

Techno blinks.

“Yeah,” he says. “That book is missing a lot of stuff and got a few interpretations of some experiments wrong too. Plus the layout is kinda bad and the wording’s dull-”

“We get it, Mr. Perfect Writer.”

“So I’ve decided I’ll write a better one,” Techno says, giving Tommy a scowl. “The *real* definitive guide to potato history and farming, because new potato farmers don’t deserve to be clouted with this mess.”

“Who’s gonna buy that?” Tommy asks. “A book on *potato farming*? ”

“I bought it, didn’t I?” Wilbur points out.

“You don’t count.”

“Plenty of people, actually,” Phil hums. “If there was one crop to make money off educating people about it would be potatoes. They grow everywhere.”

“And come in a ridiculous number of varieties,” Techno says. “Listen, I still have all my notes from the Potato War, and I have the time.” He gestures around them - the bordering forests and quaint little house. Further out encompasses blue mountains, distant oceans, air wild and free.

*Yeah*, Phil thinks. *We have time, alright.*

“I think it’s a good idea,” Wilbur says. Techno blinks.

“You do?”

And oh, there’s so much hope in those two words. It overwhelms Phil with a soft heaviness, almost, hearing Techno of all people sound like that.

Speaking with so much hope, but also so much... *surprise*. Like he had been expecting some derisive rejection instead.

They really do have so much more to do. And Phil has so much to make up for.

“I mean - I have my hobbies, and gods know you all keep hounding me about living and stuff. So you should take breaks and do what you love too,” Wilbur says, suddenly quiet. He moves forward - and a crutch edge catches on loose soil, but Techno is there and steadying him before Phil can even move.

Wilbur rights himself up and smiles up at Techno, who gives an awkward half-smile back. Neither let go of each other.

Tommy blinks between them, eyes wide. Phil understands, his own astonishment reflected.

This is the same Wilbur who begged to be killed, who they had to drag screaming and sobbing back to life. Who twisted a nation above the waves only to sink it back down in a furious tsunami. Who made children fight in wars and demanded the world bow its rules in his image-

And now he’s here, trying his best to reassure a brother who has committed actions just as terrible, if not worse. None of them are good people by any normal standards, Phil knows.

Nothing’s perfect. Things will never be completely fine - they’ve never been so to begin with, really. There will always be new shadows, or more likely, the resurfacing skeletons of old ones ready to throw them down once more.

But they’re a family, and they now hold each other close. It’ll have to be enough.

## Chapter End Notes

hey mollypollykinz look what you made me do

i didnt mean to steal lyrics from the oh hellos again but my fingers just slipped okay. if you enjoyed this anyway i cant read your mind so let me know in the comments! or with that little heart button thingy that looks kinda like the shape of my face

also pls excuse the summary shifting. during the break i reread all the chapters, especially the earlier ones, and fixed some more typos and i realized how much i dont really vibe with my earlier writing, and that includes the summary whose structure i came up with in 10 minutes on some random morning. tried to clean it up in some other ways but that reread made me realize i just need to come up with a more descriptive one lol, since valley of serenity has grown way beyond just the concept of phil not killing wilbur.

anyway we have officially gotten to what i call the “they talk out their fucking problems some more but this time with less suicide and more hugs” section. featuring: everyone being awkward but trying their best.

and dont worry, ranboo comes back next chapter... which is a rather special one :D

i reply to comments live! [twitch](#)

[tumblr](#) and [twitter](#) for questions and art!



# pretend you know this song everybody

## Chapter Notes

[discord](#) to get pings for updates/discuss stuff!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*“Wilbur? Techno?”*

*The walls give nothing. Neither does the darkness beyond, behind, looming into a non-existent heaven above. Nothing but the drip drip of rainfall seeping down stone scars. Occasional thin screech of guitar strings stretched to breaking, plucked like tears from his cheeks.*

*He takes a step forth and hits rough coldness. Something sharp and shaped like cracked dice skitters down his chest.*

*“Where - where are you guys?” he tries again. “This isn’t funny.”*

**Drip. Drip. Drip.**

*“Come back,” he says. His foot catches walls - walls, walls, and more walls.*

*When did they press so close? Where’s the lantern light?*

*He twists around - it’s a squeeze, his shoulders scraped raw but he has to know, it’ll be fine-*

*A wall of buttons greet him.*

*“You’re not my brother,” he says.*

*One of them clicks, in and out. Stone rectangle shedding blood with the movement.*

*“Wilbur! Techno!”*

*A whisper back, finally. He lurches for it - or tries to but it fails and the buttons are so close and he can’t move.*

*“Join us,” the whisper reaches regardless.*

*“But I don’t know where you are,” Tommy protests.*

*Silence. And then-*

*“That’s your problem.”*

~\*~

Tommy wakes to sunlight spots tickling the edges of his eyelids. The dream lingers behind them still, a shrouded and shriveled thing that refuses to blow away. But that’s fine, because it’s been fine since

Wilbur's return.

Yawning through the haze of his mind, he then reluctantly claws the blankets aside into a bunched, tangled pile and blinks into the window across from him.

A sky of pale blue beams beyond the glass, darker mountain peaks reaching up the canvas. Faint birdsong - cardinals and chickadees and the screech of crow flocks - slowly rise with spring petals fluttering through the wind.

Past dawn already, huh?

Phil's bed is empty, his slippers gone and blankets made. Tommy quickly does the same and then stumbles out the door, a covered yawn just barely grazing his shoulder against the frame.

Techno and Wilbur's room, across the hallway, is similarly deserted. The door hangs wide open. Their blankets, Tommy notes with a bit of vexation, are strewn messes half crumpled on the floors.

It's the other implication that perplexes him, though. He and Phil usually wake earlier than either of them. And Tommy knows he hasn't overslept - his internal alarm is a hidden pride of his. He goes to bed at a *reasonable fucking time*, unlike some people, and wakes as the monsters burn nearly on the dot each day.

But sure enough, as he rounds near the kitchen low hums of conversation grow louder. Techno and Wilbur are seated across from each other around the dining table, playing cards laid before them. They don't even look like they're from the same game - Tommy sees kings and queens and aces, but also cards with colored borders of blue or green, and ones that hold just a single word or the silhouette of an insect or whatever the weird fuck that mess of Galactic symbols are.

"Uno," Techno says. Wilbur grins and slides to the end of his card assembly another one with *fashion* printed on it in fancy red letters.

"Go fish," he says. Techno narrows his eyes and flicks out a card painted with a ship sailing oceans waters. It slides smoothly to cover a 5 of spades.

"Reverse call. Now move out your baseline."

"What the fuck," Tommy says.

Wilbur and Techno raise their heads in near identical fashion towards his voice.

"Good morning," Techno says slowly.

"Yeah yeah, good morning too," Tommy says. He begins moving again, taking a seat at the table. It's square shaped with four chairs, which means Phil should arrive across from him-

That's when the smell of freshly baked bread hits his nose. Garlic bread, with cream cheese and chopped herbs and smooth, melting butter. He knows because out of everything Phil's ever made for them, taught them to make - this has always left the greatest impression in his mind.

It's bread, and home. And it still is - it *still is*.

*Buttons and buttons and unresponsive walls-*

"You guys did the cooking without me?" Tommy asks.

That's weird. He usually wakes with Phil, both early birds unlike the rest of their family, and it's an established morning routine that they cook whatever's for breakfast together. Are Techno and Wilbur contesting the role for some reason?

Phil appears around a wall, from the little corner where they've set up a proper stone oven to bake things. Two pink oven mitts cover his hands, which hold a tray with of the aforementioned garlic bread loaf. Crust browned just a scattering on top, sides dark golden and gleaming.

And oh fuck that smells good, a hearty fragrance lined with hints of sweetness.

Something pangs in Tommy's chest. Phil used to bake all sorts of things for them back when they were all children - and garlic bread had always been one of his favorites. Again, it's home. It has to be. It's all so similar - *and yet not?*

No, it is. Just like home - or the state of homeliness they'll have eventually. Are getting to. And there's nothing blocking the way now - it's only a steady climb.

"There's more," Wilbur grins, nudging Tommy's side. Tommy blinks.

What? This is more than good enough for breakfast, especially with some tea sweetened by newly acquired honey.

As Phil lays the tray down on towels on the kitchen counter and begins slicing, Techno and Wilbur share their "ooh there's a secret to tell Tommy" looks with each other.

Fuck, they used to do *that* all the time back when they were younger too. Is this "reenact our lost childhoods day" or something?

"Good morning, Tommy," Phil says. He slides a plate of bread over to him, careful to avoid the mess of cards Wilbur and Techno are now hastily gathering up. Tommy wastes no time taking the offered fork and digging out a chunk to shove in his mouth.

Creamy warmth fills higher with every bite, tinged by the lightness of fresh herbs. It's - fuck, it's just fucking good. The past few years have at least been kind to Phil's already masterful baking skills, or maybe his brothers' if either helped at all instead of fussing over their weird card game the entire time.

He blinks as an accompanying bowl is set beside him - a light, steaming soup, by the looks of it, little bits of mushrooms and onions floating around the top. Poking around with a spoon also reveals a hunk of corn and two lamb chops.

"You guys really went overboard with breakfast today," Tommy says. "We'll be too full to get anything done."

"That's the point, isn't it?" Wilbur says.

"Huh?"

"We're not working more on the crops today," Techno says. "Or building anything. Unless you really want to."

Tommy blinks again. He digs out another chunk of garlic bread for his mouth, and swallows before trying a sip of the soup.

And yeah, it's just as good. It's savory in all the right ways, with an earthy undertone and rich fullness.

Basically, Phil is fucking good at baking. And cooking.

"Is today special?" Tommy asks, raising an eyebrow. "We getting ready to celebrate Dream's sudden imprisonment in a maximum security prison or something?"

Did Techno just mutter "fuck, that would have been a better gift" beneath his breath?

"No. Something better," Wilbur says.

"What's better than that?" Tommy asks. "Tubbo suddenly announces he's stepping down as L'Manberg's president?"

Phil grins from across the table.

"We're celebrating the day I adopted you, Tommy."

"...that's today?"

The 9th of April was the date Phil found him starving and on the brink of death after a particularly harsh winter. It later became his designated birthday, similar to how Wilbur and Techno's were decided. But Tommy thought-

Well, actually, he had completely forgotten about it. Now would be about the right time.

"You've been keeping track?" he asks.

"Well, duh," Wilbur says. "Of course we were."

"You're only a year away from being fully adult now," Techno adds.

"Fuck," Tommy groans. "Why must you remind me of my mortality? I might commit some terrible human folly in an attempt to rectify it."

Not his normal line, but this is all so - familial. Warm. *Easy*.

And he shouldn't be complaining. He really shouldn't.

"I'll read you more Greek tragedies at bedtime," Techno says.

"Fuck you, no. I take that all back."

He almost misses the way Phil had bitten his lip, glanced out a window with briefly narrowed eyes.

"Anyway," Wilbur clears his throat. "Let's finish our breakfasts first, shall we?"

And yeah, Tommy can't argue with that. This garlic bread, again, is *fucking delicious*.

~\*~

After breakfast, Tommy decides to go outside.

Honestly, he's still tempted to begin work already - spread seeds and water evenly, like Phil taught him so long ago - but he's also far too full to consider that a good idea. Instead they lounge around on wooden benches Phil had installed a few days ago, making meaningless chatter.

"-so I thought the point of the game was opening doors, you know?" Techno says. "Hence, Door Simulator 3000."

"Who's dumb enough to make a game solely about opening doors?" Tommy asks.

"Listen, you wouldn't believe how popular it got. Ridiculous, of course, but people ate it all up like the hungry vultures they are-

"As riveting as this conversation is," Wilbur suddenly clears his throat. "We have, um. Plans to execute! And it's not a birthday celebration without a song, of course. So I wrote one."

Tommy is halfway to a nod when the words sink in.

"You wrote a song to celebrate my birthday," he says, feeling the need to clarify. Wilbur nods, beaming.

"Yeah!" He pauses, and scooches closer. "I hope you like it?"

"Wilbur," Tommy says slowly. "The Happy Birthday song exists."

"But that's *boring*," Wilbur almost *whines*, just barely grazing that territory - and Tommy almost leaps out his skin because *fuck*, when was the last time he talked like *that*? "The same old tune every year, doesn't it get old?"

"Like we don't get old on our birthdays?" Tommy asks.

"Well, technically we're always getting older as our cells divide-"

"No one asked, Techno," Tommy says. To his surprise, Techno actually quiets.

The sound of a chest - ender chest - clicking is heard.

"Techno?"

Tommy looks up just in time to see Techno seat himself on the other side of him, violin and bow in hand. His shoulder rest is the same fucking pink as his hair.

"My left hand's still not healed enough to play guitar well," Wilbur says. "And the cast makes positioning awkward anyway, so Techno's accompanying me on the violin today. Don't mess up those double stops now."

"Who do you think I am?" Techno asks. He plays a few warm up scales, and then arpeggios, landing his bow lightly back on a string.

Phil's feathers rustle slightly, just the tiniest bit. He's standing to the side a foot or so away, a half-smile tugging at the corners of his lips and oddly silent.

Wilbur opens his mouth and begins to sing as Techno draws out the first chord.

*"I heard there was a special place."*

Oh, that fucker.

*“Where stars were bright and shined like day.*

*And wild winds raced among the flowers.”*

The tune is the same - but so much else shifted entirely. A different key, maybe? The chords have been rearranged for sure.

Tommy still finds his fingers twitching in some pantomime salute, an impulse which he strangles as soon as he realizes. But oh fuck, it's been a while since he's heard this tune, and as always Wilbur *nails* it.

It's always been sung with a terrible melancholy in his heart. But this rendition, it's - Tommy's realizing for the first time how *beautiful* the music is, really. Which makes sense, of course, because it's *Wilbur's* music. Despite all his mistakes, his madness - how could it not be beautiful?

*“Well this place is real, you needn't fret.*

*And I'll hold your hand with every step.*

*As we shed the brutality and the tyranny of our rulers.”*

The violin rises into a crescendo. It's singing solo by itself now, echoing the last phrase with a crying precision only those who have experienced their history could match.

*“Welcome back home,”* Wilbur rejoins. *“Welcome back home. Welcome back home.”*

Tommy doesn't know how he decided on it, but between that moment and the next he's hugging Wilbur tight, face pressed against his chest, the beat stalled and hovering for just a teary, minuscule moment before it all comes crashing back down again.

*“Welcome home...”* The last phrase is drawn out in traditional fashion, violin accompaniment fading just a tiny bit after Wilbur's voice.

“Do-” Wilbur reaches down with his other hand to better support Tommy's weight on him, breath hovering just above his forehead. “Do you like it?”

Tommy laughs, and hugs even tighter. The warmth is so much - so encompassing. Fuck, for a moment he feels the darkness recede to nothing, feels the strength to stay in Wilbur's arms forever. Like everything between them is right again.

“Yeah,” he croaks instead. His tears are drying on the shirt, but seeing as it's his birthday, and it was Wilbur's song that left him in this state to begin with, he thinks he deserves a little leeway.

“I'll sing it to you whenever you want,” Wilbur whispers to him, chin light on Tommy's head. “And - I'm sorry. For the first version ever existing in the first place.”

Something clicks again. He turns to see Techno lowering his violin case back into the nearby ender chest.

“That was - great present, guys,” Tommy manages. “I like it. I love it, actually. A lot.”

*I love you*, he wants to say, but the words wouldn't budge.

And isn't that strange, how he could love them so much even after everything. After war and destruction, how he's still not forgiven those atrocities but is crying into their arms all the same?

He loves the song. He really does, and maybe it's twisted that he could just accept the melody as this rendition as easily, and maybe it's twisted that Wilbur knows this, but - but.

*But.*

"I - glad you think so," Techno says. There's a small smile on his face, same as the one that was on Phil's.

Speaking of which. Phil's suddenly - where did Phil go?

"But that was Wilbur's gift," Techno is continuing. "I have my own-"

"They're here," Wilbur suddenly says, leaning over to nudge Techno gently.

"Who's here?" Tommy asks. He reluctantly pulls his face away from Wilbur's chest and settles for leaning against his shoulder.

"Oh, we invited a few people up to celebrate with us." Wilbur grins, just as a tall, gangly shape suddenly teleports in front of them in a shower of purple particles and familiar *vwooping* sound.

"Um - hello," Ranboo says.

"Yeah! Hi!" Hbomb staggers through the fence gates. "You guys really decided on isolation up here, huh?"

"If Techno had his way we would be a hundred leagues from the nearest settlement," Phil chuckles as he closes the gates behind Hbomb.

"Yeah, but it's - wow. That was quite the climb." Hbomb flops onto a bench and lets out a wheeze. "Anyways. Happy birthday, Tommy!"

"Thanks," Tommy says. "Uh - why are you here again?"

"I invited them," Wilbur says. He pauses. "Well, me and Phil. We went to ask Hbomb about it yesterday, and he said he could come. We needed their help with something anyway."

"I invited Ranboo too," Phil says. "Considering he's part of L'Manberg cabinet, and that he's-"

He pauses, glancing at said cabinet member. Who's poking some newly sprouted spring onions with wide, rounded eyes.

"-and that he's your age, I thought it would be a good idea."

He lowers his voice and adds, "your only social interaction shouldn't be limited to just us, Tommy."

Oh. But - Tommy hasn't really thought about it like that. His family is his family, and he's chosen them again and again in the same way they've chosen him. Shouldn't that be enough?

*It has to be enough. He can't afford otherwise.*

Even so, he won't deny getting to know more people isn't as terrible as it once sounded. Ranboo is just - well, *so* suspicious, but surely he means well? If he's planning on backstabbing them-

Okay, now is not the time to contemplate that idea. Nope. Backtrack.

Ranboo is *not* backstabbing them. Because Tommy is not dealing with that fucking shit today.

“Okay,” he elects to say. They’ll see how it works out.

“This is a nice place you got going here,” Hbomb says. “Shame that fence blocks so much of the view.”

“Don’t worry,” Techno says. “We’re fixing that soon.”

“We are?” Wilbur and Tommy ask at the same time. Techno waves a hand in that “we’ll talk about it tomorrow” way he’s so fond of. Tommy rolls his eyes, but lets the subject fall.

“Oh, yeah!” Hbomb nods to Phil, who hands Tommy a woven green basket.

“What’s this?” he asks, peering into it. There’s all sorts of things inside - wrapped candies and other foods, seashells, marbles and various trinkets, a stuffed cow and even four small cards with paintings of various birds. Tied to the handle is a white card with dark silver lettering - *To Tommy*, the cover says simply.

“I told Sanctuary we used to be allies! And that it’s your birthday!” Hbomb looks unreasonably excited. “Some people contributed to a gift basket.”

“I wove that basket,” Ranboo says. “Tried my best to - um, make it as durable as possible. Hope you get some use out of it at least.”

Oh. That’s - Tommy glances down at the contents again, so many little things people spared a thought to donate. He’s not used to this much free stuff, to say the least.

Most of it is decorative, but it’s *pretty* and he can see places for them on his bedside shelf already. Plus, there is quite a good bit of free food in there as well. He picks out a piece of hard candy and takes off the simple white wrapping - it’s an oval shaped caramel color and the flavor matches when it hits his tongue.

“Cool,” he says. “Tell them I said thanks, I guess.”

Hbomb leans forward and peers at him like he’s been suddenly rearranged into some new puzzle. Tommy is now somewhat used to such looks, so he gives him a “what?” shrug and it quickly dissipates.

Techno makes an attempt at clearing his throat.

“As I was saying,” he says. “Ranboo, did you bring my gift up too?”

“Oh! Um, yeah-”

Ranboo blinks up at Techno with something like clear awe, stuttering a few more moments before pointing at Phil. “Philza has it. Her.”

“Her?” Tommy echoes.

Phil now looks immensely relieved. He shifts something out from underneath his cloak - it’s warm, pale gold like the sun and covered in fur, four legs tangling over each other. He sets it on the ground



and it stumbles upright-

"I spent days looking through all the options to pick out the friendliest, liveliest one," Techno says.  
"Uh - this one really liked me and I thought-

"Techno," Tommy says, staring at the scrabbling creature. "That's a puppy."

There's an awkward pause.

"Yeah," Techno says. "That's - uh. That's a puppy."

"Yeah," Ranboo echoes, before slapping a hand over his mouth again.

The puppy in question finally gets up and begins shaking her fur madly, like she's trying to clear it of dust mites or some phantom itch - which Tommy knows from experience is impossible.

When she eventually stops, legs tottering as she takes a few cautious steps, Tommy finally pulls himself off the bench and walks - almost creeps - over.

There's no resistance when he picks her up, only a yap and soft paws batting at his chin. Floofy golden fur tangles beneath his fingers.

"Hello," Tommy says, because fuck. The silence is kind of getting to him.

The puppy barks back, tag wagging.

"Do you - uh. I know you really wanted a dog when you were younger," Techno clears his throat.  
"And it's been scientifically proven friendly animals reduce stress levels and help alleviate the effects of trauma-

"And all that nerdy stuff, yeah," Tommy cuts off. He baps the puppy's nose with his own, grinning when she excitedly wiggles back in reply. "I'm naming her Clementine."

Techno's shoulders relax, far more obvious than it usually is.

"Hello, Clementine," Tommy whispers. Clementine barks some more, and he moves back to his seat between Wilbur and Techno to set her on his lap.

Thankfully, she doesn't immediately bolt off into some unreachable cranny, but instead curls up on his lap and promptly falls asleep.

"I love her," Tommy decides. It's an easier admission than others.

And a pinprick of - *something*, fear maybe, stabs at it. This is a new attachment, new leash - but no, he can't.

He has to trust his family. He has to be better, like them, cooperate and show he's grown, he's learned, he's not the same stupid child he was just a few months ago. They've presented - well, not everything, but enough. It's his turn.

"I love her more than I love all of you three combined," he tries. The exaggeration falls a bit flat here, but Wilbur lets out a chuckle in response and Tommy smiles. At least the smile is better this time, or so he hopes - surely there's less brittleness to it?

He means it, after all. He has to. The smile, that is.

“That’s fair,” Techno says.

Oh, right. His brother is a huge fucking sucker for cute animals, far more than Tommy will ever be (Clementine the sole exception, of course). When they were younger, Techno was always the one to nurse stray cats and foxes back to health, leave grain in bird feeders he had meticulously designed and built himself.

It’s kind of cute too, actually.

“Well,” Wilbur says. “I’m not sure Phil can top that.”

“I don’t think I can either,” Phil laughs, moving over. His is the only gift that’s wrapped - in a silvery mesh-like covering, darker lines between milky drops like scales on a fish. It’s surprisingly soft.

Tommy unties the silk bow first, a dark blue-green color reminiscent of ender pearls. The wrapping is tugged out and used to cover Clementine’s sleeping body.

Then he finally sees what it is, slowly unfurling - a cloak. The weight is almost nothing in his hands, like he’s holding sheets of air itself. It’s shaped almost like a bird’s wings outstretched - the edges are a series of curves like primary feathers, creating an overall triangular shape. The only deviation is the hood at the top, with the collar area holding more fabric and a wing-shaped clasp to fit around his neck.

The underside is black as night, but the top are patterns of green and sky blue, cloud-like patches drifting into each other with the occasional marble streak. The entire cloak shimmers with enchantment energy, but something far older and far more powerful than what an enchantment table could possibly infuse.

“This cloak - well. It’s got the same properties as an elytra,” Phil says.

Tommy holds the fabric against his cheek.

Elytras are two rounded, insect-like wings with stiffened edges and magic constantly leaking from them when in use, repaired only by collecting the remnants of literal living nightmares. He’s grown to love using them, love the freedom they give, but they don’t feel like - like this. Like the sky itself commandeered beneath his fingers.

This cloak, so much lighter and softer and quite frankly *prettier* than what he’s used to. This has the properties of an elytra?

“It’s actually a bit better,” Phil adds. “Got some more maneuverability since the sides are more flexible. Not exactly gonna protect you from the cold, but I did manage to add protection, fire protection, and blast protection enchantments too.”

“What the fuck,” Tommy manages. His head almost doesn’t comprehend that list, because... “How?”

Phil chuckles, but he stares at Tommy with a look too still to be anything confident.

“Lots of time and fiddling with old magic. The material’s made from elytra membrane and silk - it won’t need repairing unless something seriously damages it, which should be pretty hard. Very tear-resistant too.”

“Okay,” Wilbur says. “I wrote a whole song and you two still manage to top me by this much. Wow.”

Tommy shrugs the cloak over his shoulders and fits the silver clasp together. Phil’s right - it’s definitely not protecting him from the cold. He’ll still need his fur cloaks for that - not that it’ll be relevant for much longer, with spring in full force and the snow now melted into raggy patches.

He feels lighter with it on already. Like he could jump and glide away to wherever he wishes, just as he’s seen Phil do so many times.

“I - thanks-” he breaks off, and says in a quieter tone - “thanks, Dadza.”

Phil stills, eyes widening like the name has shot an arrow through his heart. Wilbur and Techno both fail to muffle their gasps.

“I mean it,” Tommy says.

And is - is he really about to do this?

...ah, fuck it.

He spreads his arms out, an invitation, and Phil almost collapses into them. They’re careful not to jolt Clementine from her sleep, but for a few moments it’s just Tommy with his father, embracing for all the moments they’ve lost and are now working so hard to gain back.

*And please, please let this be the reality, that they’re stable and working and good and nothing will ever come crashing down on their family again because Tommy misses this so much-*

“I’m sorry for everything you’ve had to survive,” Phil whispers in the moment, and Tommy can only shift a nod against the waves black feathers - an acknowledgement. That things aren’t right, weren’t right - but that they’re working towards getting there. They all are.

They have to pull away eventually, however, Phil quickly drying tears with a few flicks of his wings. Wilbur immediately over takes the hug, an arm wrapped tightly around Tommy.

“You know you don’t need to use my birthday as an excuse to hug me, right?” Tommy asks. Wilbur shrugs.

“Oh! We also said - um.” Ranboo’s voice cuts through the haze. He and Hbomb look vaguely amused at the whole scenario, though there’s still that nervous stutter Tommy’s never heard him without.

“Philza - I brought the ingredients you asked for.”

“Great!” Phil beams. He’s glided over in a flash, peering into another basket of items and nodding with a satisfied expression.

“What ingredients?” Tommy asks, blinking.

“Um - flour,” Ranboo says as Phil plucks the basket from his grasp. “Eggs. Milk. Sugar. Cocoa powder. Vanilla. Chocolate pieces. Strawberries-”

“We’re baking a cake,” Techno says, as if it isn’t obvious enough already. “A bit later, obviously.”

Oh. Well, that makes sense.

Tommy scoops Clementine into his arms and rises up.

“Great,” he says, the cloak swishing quietly with the soft breeze.

Wilbur stands up as well, and gives him another brief hug.

“Yep,” he grins. “It’ll be *so* much fun. Just you wait.”

Oh fucking great. Someone’s going to be washing flour from their hair tonight.

~\*~

Hbomb leaves shortly after a tour of their house, probably sensing the private nature of the upcoming festivities, but Phil quickly catches Ranboo’s arm when he tries to do the same and extends an invitation to stay.

If Tommy didn’t already know what he was planning, he might have mistaken it for another son acquisition attempt.

The next two hours pass by in relative peace - Clementine wakes up sometime in the middle and Tommy spends a good while playing fetch and watching in amusement as she darts between the rooms yapping like she was expecting some monster to fight in each one. Techno accompanies him, trailing her with a similar fondness.

“Good girl,” Tommy grins as she comes darting back with the wooden spoon in her mouth. It’s now dented with thorn-shaped teeth marks and wet with drool, but he takes and holds it up nonetheless.

Clementine barks again, spinning a few erratic circles before flopping down at his feet.

“I think she’s tired,” Techno comments. “That’s a first.”

“Bet she just wants cuddles,” Tommy grins, picking her up. Sure enough, Clementine snuggles into his arms with a soft whine.

They leave her on his bed with the spoon, covered with a blanket and fast asleep again.

Phil calls for them soon afterwards, having readied the oven - they’re baking a cake.

“I don’t think I’ve actually baked a cake before,” Tommy says, peering at the eggs. These are brown in color and translucent enough to make out a yolk when held up just right against the sunlight.

“I have,” Ranboo chimes. Then he winces. “It’s - uh. That one didn’t turn out too well though.”

“There’s no need to cook anything yourself on Hypixel,” Techno shrugs. “Most of the population can’t do much more than boil water, so it’s mildly impressive if you got anything even edible.”

“Well, I guess it was?” Ranboo’s expression turns into another gawk as he shifts a quick glance in Techno’s direction before whipping back to focus, far too intensively, on the bowl of sugar in front of him.

Tommy stifles a snort. He’s not sure when Ranboo first realized the famous Technoblade is here, or that Tommy and Wilbur are his brothers and Philza their father, but whenever Techno addresses him for *anything* his eyes go comically wide and jolting. It’s honestly fucking hilarious.

“Alright,” Phil clears his throat. “Pass me the flour.”

And so it goes. The cake making itself turns out to be relatively straightforward - mix these ingredients here with this at this time, or whatever Phil says.

So they have to liven things up somehow. Tommy challenges Wilbur to crack the eggs with one hand only, which eventually results in a splatter of raw egg across their floorboards and Wilbur's fingers absolutely dripping with yolk.

Techno merely sighs as he mops up what bits of egg he can with a rag and covers the rest in flour, resulting in a dough-like texture that's far easier to scoop up than smears of egg white.

Tommy's never learned that trick, actually, though there were probably many, many miscracked eggs from his childhood. More lessons he should have learned far earlier than this.

*But it's fine*, he reminds himself. *You're learning now. We all are.*

"Now my fingers are all sticky," Wilbur complains.

"You're the one who accepted Tommy's challenge," Techno says. "Figure it out."

"Was I supposed to deny the birthday boy his request? How dare you suggest I be a bad brother, Techno!" Wilbur gives him a dramatic shove with his elbow cast, which Techno brushes off with an unamused look.

"Anyway, my fingers are still sticky," Wilbur adds.

"Then why don't you lick them clean?" Techno mutters.

A grin slowly dawns on Wilbur's expression, with just a hint of that mania Tommy recognizes all too well.

Slowly, Wilbur brings his hand to his mouth. Wraps his lips around his middle finger, and begins to make obviously exaggerated sucking noises. Tommy has to turn away when the finger begins sliding back and forth, desperately holding back choked giggles.

He then bursts into screeching laughter upon seeing Techno's mortified expression, like Wilbur's done the equivalent of swallowing an entire raw egg whole before him, or-

Okay, that's too much even for him.

"What the fuck," Ranboo say slowly. Fear swirls deep in his eyes. His head twitches once, twice, but he seems unable to turn away.

Tommy reaches out and turns his head for him.

"Don't look, Ranboo," he whispers seriously. His fingers move to cover the multi-colored eyes. "It's too inappropriate for us"

"WILBUR!" Techno screams, voice cracking in absolute terror. "I DIDN'T ACTUALLY MEAN YOU SHOULD-" There's a loud crash, and then Wilbur's wheezing laughs fill air.

"What is going on?" Phil pokes his head from the oven corner again.

Tommy cautiously turns back to see Wilbur laughing hysterically as Techno has him on the floor. The yolk-covered fingers (now also dripping in saliva, which is *fucking gross*) are pinned by the wrist on

the ground.

There's a wild look to both their eyes, their hair slighter more ruffled than before. More shattered eggs smear everything around them - somewhere in the scuffle, another few must have fallen off the table. Techno's loose pink hair is tangled like an ivy nest in yellow and bits of shell.

"What the fuck," Phil says. "I leave you guys alone for a *single* minute-"

"Wilbur started it," Techno says hysterically, jabbing a dripping finger in his direction. "It's - he was-"

"*You* suggested it-"

"I was joking! I try to be socially literate *for once* and you took that trust and used it against me, *betrayed me*-"

"If it weren't for you we wouldn't be in this mess right now-"

"Don't use that excuse! You know what you did-"

"Phil," Tommy whispers as loudly as he can. "The children are fighting."

"What the fuck-" Wilbur coughs, and shoves Techno off of him. "We're not the-"

"You two better have this cleaned up in 5 minutes," Phil says flatly. "Or else neither of you are having any of the cake."

Needless to say, they got the rest of the batter done without any interruptions.

~\*~

The cake - chocolate with more chocolate toppings, as well as vanilla buttercream and strawberries - turns out delicious like expected. Fluffy, moist texture and the flavor bursting with richness. Phil knows what he's doing, after all.

Tommy has to, very sadly, force Clementine away from taking any bites. But everyone agrees the cake, despite all their interruptions, is one of the best things they've ever tasted.

"So what's next?" Wilbur asks as he very publicly licks the last of the buttercream from his fingers, grinning towards Techno's despairful expression while Tommy tries not to snort out a laugh.

"Actually." Ranboo slides the small notebook in his hands back into a shirt pocket, and clears his throat. "Since I'm here, I - um. I should - I need to tell Tommy something. Alone. Preferably."

The admission catches Tommy by surprise.

"About what?" he asks.

"It's - uh. About me and Tubbo."

Everyone falls silent again, for a moment.

"Well," Phil begins. "If you - Tommy?"

"Sure," Tommy shrugs. "We can go to my room. Clementine stays with us though."

At the sound of her name, Clementine raises her head off the floor and barks again, tail thumping on the oak floor.

Tommy's reasonably sure Ranboo won't try to murder him. Even if he can teleport away afterwards. And there's no one fast enough to stop him. And he's just mysteriously requested to be with him alone.

Okay, maybe doing this whole thing alone is a bad idea (with a whole slew of potential dangers he really, really doesn't want to consider), but Tommy *does* know that there absolutely is *something* going on between Ranboo and Tubbo and fucking damnit, he wants to know so badly.

He's have to rely on some trust here. Which - blergh. But whatever.

"Alright, ender boy," he says. "Come on."

As Tommy opens the door to the room, Clementine leaps into the bed first and falls down on the pillow with huge, blinking blue eyes.

Tommy sits down next to her, and pats the space beside him. Slowly, Ranboo slinks over to the spot.

"So what is it?" Tommy asks.

"Um, first of all-" Ranboo bites his lip for a moment, but continues quickly. "I - uh. I have a bad memory. It's not as bad as it used to be - like, when I was younger I forgot nearly everything that happened every day. Now it's a lot more manageable, but I still forget important things sometimes. So I... write events down, just in case. That's why you see me with the - um. With my book out so much."

Oh. Tommy had vaguely wondered about that.

"Cool," he says.

If this is it, it's a pretty anticlimactic confession. Is he trying to say he's here because his memory became too much of a problem to continue working on L'Manberg's cabinet?

"And the second - uh. The second thing, and this is the one about Tubbo..." Oh, there it is. The juicy bits.

Ranboo lifts up his left hand, palm down, and in the windowed sunlight Tommy can make out an inscription in the gold ring he has on his index finger. It's in Galactic - really, really old Galactic too, that much he can tell. Emerald droplets stud the sides, and tiny claws hold a large green centerpiece in the middle of the band.

"The emeralds do seem like Tubbo's style," Tommy says, for lack of anything else. There's something obvious he's missing, isn't there?

Judging from Ranboo's expression, there absolutely is.

"I - I really have to say it out loud, don't I?" he asks, twisting the ring back and forth.

"Yep," Tommy says. "I'm not a mind reader."

Ranboo takes a deep breath, and begins muttering.

“Okay, okay. I can do this. This is fine. Things will be fine. He was Tubbo’s best friend - oh but he *was* - or is he still is, Tubbo never told me he wasn’t - but what about us? But we *just* met a few months ago, and that was when we got-”

He breaks off, wincing to some distant memory.

Tommy waits. He’s seen enough of this to know, to understand the awful feeling of trying to prepare for something that could all come crashing down in an instant.

Though, he wonders what Ranboo thinks he might possibly do to him. He thinks he’s made a decent impression, even if he knows better than to think anything along the lines of “the news can’t be *that* bad, can’t it?”

Because it absolutely can be.

...nah. Things will be *fine*.

“Breathe, Ranboo, breathe,” Ranboo continues to mutter. “Okay it’s - um.”

Tommy waits some more.

“I - uh.” Another deep breath. “I’m - Tubbo and I - you know. We’re, um, like - I didn’t really agree to any of this and technically Tubbo did but it was because he really needed Hypixel’s help and yeah I was kinda annoyed and really scared at first because, you know, I didn’t have *any* choice at all but hey! It’s not completely terrible. Like, of all the husbands I could have been stuck with Tubbo’s probably one of the better ones, even if I have to always watch everything I do because haha, fuck Dream, and also everyone’s wondering how I’ll mess up but hey it can’t be anything compared to whatever Tubbo’s feeling, right? And I’m very much *not* salty at all that he forced that same pressure on me because that would make me a bad, selfish spouse and I’m not-”

“Back up,” Tommy says. Ranboo shuts his mouth faster than a flytrap and tilts his head up to a ceiling stare.

Tommy takes a deep breath himself.

“You and Tubbo are married?”

“...yes?”

Tommy tries his best not to stare into Ranboo’s eyes. He really does. And to his credit he most succeeds, barring one awkward second where Ranboo flinches into a tangle of blankets like he’s been slapped.

“Okay,” Tommy eventually replies. “Sure.”

He - fuck.

He can’t really say he’s surprised. Tubbo’s already given up so much to secure L’Manberg’s position as a nation - his time, his reputation, his happiness - why not his romantic life too?

Though Tommy has never penned Tubbo as the romantic type anyway. Neither of them are.

“Wait - this marriage is like - so let me get this straight.” He takes another breath. “For Hypixel to agree to break its neutrality and commit to a deal with L’Manberg, one of the conditions was that



Tubbo married you?"

"Yeah," Ranboo says. He looks almost ashamed to admit it, which - wow, not good. The whole situation is several levels of fucked up, actually.

But Ranboo barrels on.

"I'm - was - one of their champion fighters. And we're basically their equivalent of nobility or whatever - or just political bargaining chips for the admins, I guess, which is fine most of the time because Hypixel doesn't really get involved in other nations' politics. But when they do, uh. They want to make sure the deal is really, really sealed, you know? Because they're investing a lot in L'Manberg."

"I do understand," Tommy exhales. It's a good move to make, tethering the nation's leader to one of their own. Everything else Ranboo's said about his work with L'Manberg, his previous time - it makes far more sense now, recontextualized like this. "But you and Tubbo are..."

"We first met each other at our wedding ceremony," Ranboo admits. "It was, uh - awkward. But we're friends now - though just friends, of course. I'm here because - well. Because working in L'Manberg's government was really stressing me out, and Tubbo agreed to let me take a break by coming here."

"He has to agree to let you go?" Tommy finds himself asking. "You can't just leave?"

Ranboo looks away.

"It's not - I mean, I had to tell him no matter what, you know? It wasn't like I could just walk 20 miles through unfamiliar land to a harbor looking like this, and flag a ship down to sail off. Where would I get money? Protection? A crew willing to help me?"

A sigh that suddenly sounds so, so very tired.

"He's also the one who controls my schedule, and chooses who goes in and out the White House. Like, to physically leave, I had to tell him so he could make the arrangements. Which... sort of means I needed his permission? But he was super understanding - like, he even encouraged me to go! Even if he looked a little sad about it-"

"Probably because I had left him just like that," Tommy says quietly. Ranboo stills, turning back to him.

"Oh."

"Yeah." Tommy reaches out and fluffs up Clementine's fur a little - she makes a tiny approximation of a yawn and wiggles for a second, but stays asleep. "Except I always had the choice to just walk away, and I did. Told him this whole government thing wasn't for me. And he agreed. He said my family needed me more, and - and fuck. He was right. He was more sure of that fact than I was, and he was right."

"He was right when he said a vacation here would be good for me too," Ranboo admits. "I haven't felt this good since I was just a Hypixel citizen - I feel better, actually. I kind of wish he was here with us. But I just. Left him. Alone again, to deal with everything."

"Me too," Tommy says quietly. "But he chose his priorities and we chose ours. Now we have to deal with them."

“Yeah,” Ranboo says. Then he blinks, and shifts out his book. Flips open to a page and glances across for a few seconds before tucking it away again.

“What is it?” Tommy asks. Ranboo gives a small laugh.

“It’s your birthday, and I thought - I thought I had something prepared to give you this conversation, but I couldn’t think of it. I remember now.”

“Oh?” Another present? Ranboo doesn’t seem to have anything on him, but maybe it’s something intangible like Wilbur’s song.

“It’s - um. Tubbo and I worked out a letter system between us. With, like - ships and birds and stuff, and it’s faster than normal transcontinental systems. The ship that’s supposed to pick my latest letter up arrives in two days, and you could, um. I could include a letter from you in there too.”

Ranboo’s fingers twirl around each other with increasing rapidity as the silence continues.

“Um - Tommy?”

“You mean-” Tommy swallows his next words, all half mangled and slippery, and tries again. “You mean I - I could send a letter? Directly to Tubbo?”

“Yeah,” Ranboo nods. “And he could - I’m sure he’ll send one back.”

That’s all Ranboo gets out before Tommy’s squeezing his arms tight around his shoulders, breath shuddering.

Tubbo. He can talk to Tubbo again. He can still support him, somehow, even in this limited way he’ll be stuck with. He can - Tubbo will-”

“Fucking - this is. I-” Tommy loosens his grip on Ranboo and pointedly stays silent as he wipes the corner of a blanket over his eyes. “You know, I didn’t expect my birthday to turn into a gift-giving competition. But your gift has definitely - well, okay, Clementine’s the best. But yours is fucking amazing too.”

They all are. But.

*Tubbo.*

“Oh - oh! Uh. Thanks?”

Tommy laughs, closes his eyes, and pulls Ranboo into another hug. For just a moment, he can almost imagine Tubbo brushing beside them with a smile also.

## Chapter End Notes

ahah no i dont know how i produced another over 7000 word chapter (~7400 words) either. this was written in one 6-hour sitting by the way, barring the editing

also writing tommy having like the dream breakfast when I can only look forward to cup noodles is fucking torture why do i do this to myself sljdlkflds

and wilbur being a little shit is one of the funniest things ive ever written, i havent laughed so hard in a super long time. dont let him fool you tho... or maybe do, the reactions will be funnier later

i reply to comments lives! [twitch](#)

[tumblr](#) and [twitter](#) for questions and art!

# and as the ball of thread unravels we lay scrabbling for its ends

## Chapter Notes

[discord](#) to get pings for updates/discuss stuff!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The morning after his birthday, Tommy slides out of bed while the rest of his family still sleeps, grabs a sword and shield, and tip-toes his way out the door. He feels childish doing so, cheeks maybe smoldering just a bit in shame - but it works, and no one is any wiser.

The path is set and his steps steady, despite the few times he has traversed it. They don't really do that much work in the back end of the house, just forest and more forest and then a sheer cliff drop, like every other direction. A stone wall cover blocks half the view anyway, beginning where their fences end.

There's still the occasional burning zombie or sly skeleton lurking in the shadows. Tommy cuts a few down with quick, crushing slashes, blocks a few arrows as well. In one instance he has to skitter around a creeper for a solid minute to kill it without an explosion.

But the path is set and his paths steady. He reaches it quickly enough.

The patch of dirt where he had planted the moobloom bulbs is tufted with tiny grass shoots, green as the springtime. There's an occasional early dandelion waving its stalks among them, no doubt soon to be followed by a flood. No bees yet, probably never will be, but - maybe. The wind, like old leaves tracing his cheeks, promise more to follow.

It's golden sunlight flowers, almost lily-like in shape, that really catch Tommy's eyes. There's only one fully bloomed, three with petals colored the same but drawn up tight like children refusing to leave each others' embraces. Five green stems in total, viridian leaves curving up like cutlasses. The scent of nectarine honey cups his nose just like how all the books said it would

He dares reach out to caress a petal, before almost drawing it back.

But no - the flowers are fragile, but not that fragile. He can touch one - just one, right? And just one touch?

A finger draws forth again, and this time runs down a surface softer than silk, cool as the ocean. It wraps around his finger for just a moment, humming deep, dark mysteries.

It's all over in a split second, however. With a blink his hands are against his chest and the wind is rushing through him, needling its way in even the densest swath of forest.

With one last glance, Tommy leaves the clearing and hurries along the path back home.

~\*~

"Do we really need this many fucking potatoes?" Tommy asks. "Don't you have your data already?"

“Yes, but I also like the taste of potatoes,” Techno says. He pats down another bulbous eye.

“Then buy them from the town!”

Techno turns to fix Tommy with a stare like tempered obsidian.

“The point of being the world’s leading expert on potatoes,” he says slowly. “Is that the potatoes I grow are better than anyone else’s.”

“Actually not true,” Wilbur chimes in. “No amount of technique can make up for poor soil quality-”

“I’m *trying* to hold a debate here, Wilbur-”

“And if your argument’s full of holes you should expect people to poke in them.”

“No thanks,” Tommy says. He lifts his watering can higher, almost waving. “We’re going to keep planting our seeds - or weird potato eyes - and not poke into stupid ass arguments.”

“You’re the one who objected to my potatoes,” Techno says. “I’m sad now. I quite like potatoes, in case you didn’t know.”

Thing is, Tommy quite likes the taste of them too. It’s just that Pogtopia was *full* to the brim with them, until all they had was potato soup and baked potatoes and grilled potato slices and *maybe*, if they were lucky, slightly undercooked bat meat with mashed potato stuffings.

Sure, they could have technically survived just fine on potatoes alone, but that’s like saying someone could technically survive trapped in an obsidian box with unlimited food and water alone for all eternity.

“No one’s stopping you from planting your potatoes,” Tommy settles on muttering.

Compared to the countless spuds he’s held, the sash of strawberry seeds feels light as butterflies. They glide across the air like so, too, as they’re scattered around.

Phil has already sectioned off an area for trellises, rows of wooden poles lining the ground like soldiers and gridding tops like a net. They had planted beans and - grapes, isn’t it? Beans and grapes, yeah, and some other squash-like plant Tommy’s already forgotten the name of.

Wilbur’s choice of seeds are pumpkins and poppies - an odd combination that has to be spaced out so one doesn’t strangle the other, but to each their own.

After the morning of the planting and watering, they devolve into small banter and jokes. Wilbur begins singing some ridiculous rendition of *The Squid Song* again, this time with something about them “glowing bright as Dream’s big, round, fatty cheeks” with a grin that makes Techno threaten to tackle him again.

Tommy knows the implication of the lyrics, but suspects there’s some further joke he’s missing.

Oh well.

“You know,” Phil says after Wilbur finishes another verse of some tune he’s dubbed *Pigstep but it’s cool, unlike Techno*, “your hands are probably healed enough to take the cast off.”

Wilbur abruptly cuts off in a choke, like he's been strangled. Techno's halfway over before catching himself. There's a glitter in his eyes that's more than surprise or regret.

Tommy doesn't stop himself, however. His boots dig into stringy grass and suddenly he finds himself in Wilbur's grasp again, grip like hugging the full moon's light.

And this time there's another set, a curtain of feathers smoothing down his hair as Phil laughs quietly beside them.

From the corner of his eye he catches a flash of pink - Techno staring at them with some mired expression caught in the sunlight.

"Jealous?" Tommy jokes. "Bet you wanna be squished this badly too."

Willbur pulls away from the hug at the words and turns to Techno as well. Tommy doesn't catch his face - but there's a step forward and suddenly Techno yelps as he's engulfed in Wilbur's arms.

He's oddly still in them too. It takes a minute to realize Techno's *relaxed* into the hug, which is - huh.

Which isn't as surprising as it should be, in all honesty. Why hadn't they thought of that before?

*Assumptions*, he comes up with. *Refusing to part with old assumptions*.

He wonders what else he's missed, still clinging to the remnants of an old world, old rules. There's a better to be done, though, and so for now Tommy resolves to take things one step at a time.

He can't afford to mess this up. He can't. This chance to start all over, to build them all up on ground higher than Dream could ever even think of reaching. He has to do this right.

Tommy grins, tight and focused, and joins Wilbur in the "hug Techno to speechlessness" pile.

~\*~

They do eventually untangle themselves apart and begin working on cutting Wilbur's cast away. It's been a few more weeks since Tommy's birthday, April over and May now humming its leaf-rustle songs.

Wilbur actually suspects they're a few days late on cutting the cast, but it's better late than early anyway. The one on his leg will stay on for another week or two, but it's his arm that's more important.

His arm means the other side of his music - his guitar - will return to him. Not yet, but soon. Sooner.

It doesn't mean Tommy will give up the pursuit, of course. He still plays the thing nearly every morning, endearingly determined in his studies. But they'll now share, and Wilbur can complete his music's set.

The removal is slow, the wait more painful than anything else. But eventually the blade is drawn back, the opening pried apart, and his elbow laid bare like a boiled egg.

Wilbur doesn't move it in the moments after, can only stare. He eventually managed to maneuver the elbow against his arm, where it now gets relegated to a light sling.

The cast is off, but it'll still take a while for his muscles to fully adjust. Even with another Notch apple or two. Gods know how much he'll be hounded by his family if he dares strain it again.

He does miss the guitar a lot, though. An awful, choking lot, like lovers ripped apart. It's disconcerting.

Almost frightening. Wilbur's not sure he likes it.

But he refuses to go down that route right now.

"How do you feel?" Phil asks. He's tossed the cast's remnants into the nearby trash bin, gaze already turning back to them.

Wilbur's father is like that - ever pushing onward into the future.

"Alright," he responds. The limb's not moving beyond an inch or so on its own, and even then with waves of shaking pain, but that was to be expected after how long it's been bound to rest.

The guitar will have to wait.

But his family never will, and terrifying as the fact is, at least Wilbur can now gleam some purpose from it too.

~\*~

It's been a while since there's just the three of them, stepping around each other with the carefree knowledge of no war, no pressure. Phil bidding them goodbye with wings fluttering nervously.

They're in the town again, Wilbur and Techno trailing Tommy and thus, whatever catches Tommy's eye. Techno has a cloak - a thin, darker green that technically belongs to Phil - spilling over his shoulders. The hood masks his hair as always, and in the low sunlight his eyes are an almost normal brown, good enough for people expecting such.

Techno is three steps behind Tommy when his brother stops suddenly beside a wrought iron gate painted silver, bordered by walls of green hedges on either side. They're not locked, and beyond is a sprawling garden that appears to extend to the town's very edge.

It's fields of blossoming vines, swaying stems rippling the world's wonders into their morning-dewed bodies. Herbs and flowers dance through each other, above trimmed hedges and trodden garden paths, twisting around iron spires and the swinging platforms held between all blooming with baskets of orchids. Trees row the back, dot the scene - Techno recognizes magnolia and peach with curling leaves almost fully re-grown.

There's a single person visible beyond the gates, a slime hybrid of some sort. He has a white lily between his fingers. It's held up to the sunlight, peered by two black beads swirling within the viscous of his head - like the entire slimy circle is the eye with twin bouncing pupils.

He notices their staring almost immediately, shoulders having tensed up for that miniscule moment. But it takes a while more before something is done for it. Techno waits in the while, Tommy oddly silent and studying.

But eventually the man presses the lily against his bare, jelly-like head, pushing in, concaving a larger and larger dent into whatever constitutes a skin for his body - and then it slides through some invisible barrier and floats, ever so gently, among the internal slime.

The lily bobbles as he then makes his way towards them, in exactly the place where brains would normally go.

“I believe you’ve seen me before,” the slime hybrids says to Tommy as he nears them. Tommy nods.

“Yeah, you were with Scott and Hbomb, with that whole conversation. Didn’t hear you say anything though.”

“Well, the name’s Pete,” Pete says. He holds out a rounded ball of a hand protruding from his jacket sleeve, which quickly morphs into something more vaguely hand shaped for Tommy to shake.

Shake they do, and then he does so with Techno and Wilbur as well. The touch is like running fingers down tiny bedmoss - oddly soft and warping beneath.

Techno’s only met a few other slime hybrids in his life, all on Hypixel - they’re one of the rarer breeds. Sanctuary certainly has some story to tell about its density of non-humans.

“I try to keep out drama,” Pete says. Techno grips back onto the present as Tommy follows them into the garden, Wilbur keeping just a pace behind.

“Good life philosophy,” Wilbur notes back, tone quivering the faintest bit towards the end. Techno presses a bit closer and hopes it makes something better, at least.

“Right. Anyway, here’s Sanctuary’s gardens if you’re interested. It’s probably the most interesting place in the whole town.”

It certainly is to Techno, barring perhaps the library. The rest of the world falls away in the foliage - like there’s no civilization, no ocean, no disturbance beyond the distant walls of branches. It’s a place from the fairytale books of old, where he can step beyond a gate so like the one he has just done and find a completely new world mirrored with wild magic.

Of course, Sanctuary and the mountains around here are filled with wild magic and so is he, so he supposes the setting checks out.

“So people just come - relax and shit?” Tommy asks. He brushes fingers down a crimson red carnelian. Wilbur seats himself on a nearby bench of pure white wood, armrests the shape of serpents. His crutches are leaned against his right leg.

“Yeah. And try the parkour course if they’re up for it,” Pete says.

Parkour course?

That snaps Techno’s attention away from the spider lily he had been studying. He takes another study at the hanging metal platforms. At the poles twisted in strange, broken-web shapes and sunlight glint of wires stretched taut between them.

There’s a path tracing itself out before him.

And then he notices the hourglass of black sand suspended towards the very top, silver wires curling around it. A mechanism wounding itself, ready to keep time.

“My time is the record so far,” Pete says. “48 seconds around the whole thing.”



There's the familiar frown of dissatisfaction that accompanies the statement, because of course - there's always room for improvement.

"Where do I begin?" Techno asks in reply.

~\*~

Whoever designed the course clearly knew what they were doing. There's more nuance to the parkour than it looks - all hidden wiring and spacings measured to be as awkward to traverse as possible. Red ribbons mark the path, each woven with a number that must be followed - first to 1, then 2, then 3, and so on.

The greenery is guided to be of no help either - and Techno quickly discovers the flower baskets are placed to keep the most obvious spots from being trodden on. Each leap has to be planned beginning to end - where to jump, how to twist, the weight of the landing all precisely mapped in their calculations. Paced just so lest the penalty of disturbing the garden's balances brings its own weight up him.

It's a well designed challenge.

His cloak doesn't help things either - by now the town's accepted it's not coming off, and it isn't, so Techno ties the ends against his neck to draw the fabric up and decides that's good enough.

He runs the course a total of twenty times and eventually slices his time down to a 1:01, marked carefully on the hourglass' side.

Compared to Pete's 0:48, the gap is mountainous. Every millisecond an entire chasm between them, emptiness the preciseness each movement requires.

"Are you done?" Tommy asks after the twentieth time. He now looks vaguely bored, as does Wilbur.

So Techno concedes to the point and trails them out the garden. Pete watches him leave with a somewhat impressed look as he sits, legs swinging, on a high silver platform.

Techno considers that as some form of success, at least.

The lily in Pete's head is half-dissolved when he glances back one last time, translucent as the rest of him and spotted with holes as it continues to float among the slime. Techno's never considered the unique methods of slime digestion - Pete will certainly be someone to look out for when they next arrive back.

They eventually end up at what turns out to be Hbomb's residence next. Ranboo is who answers the door - upon seeing Tommy he almost immediately grins, brimmed with far more confidence than when Techno first met him.

Tommy had told them that night, on his birthday, the news he had been given - about Tubbo and Ranboo's marriage, and the alliance with Hypixel. Techno can't say he's particularly surprised, really.

It's jarring, though, how much a few months can completely change someone.

Tommy drags Ranboo into their activities, which consists of a few more aimless walks around the town before finally, eventually, ending with their faces turned towards the oceans.

As all things eventually do.

Wilbur disappears from their sight for a brief moment, and quickly reappears with fishing rods. They make good use of the piers - empty today, a rarity in busy trading season - and cast lines as far as they can.

Ranboo's wary of the idea for a moment, eyeing the water with an unease that has to be learned. But there is enough distance between him and the splashes that he eventually joins Tommy's side, and they lean against each other with whispered conversations.

Techno can sink into the motions of fishing - it's like tending to crops, really. Slow and monotonous, relaxing by right. Lulling waves taken, occasionally, by the thundering tsunami.

A quick question confirms they're content to fish the afternoon away. Throw the time remaining to the crashing shores, with the promise of Phil's wings and their home on the mountain when the sun dips below the mountain lines.

It's as good an activity as any. Techno closes his eyes and lets the motions wash over him.

~\*~

*President Tubbo Underscore*

*White House Capital Building, L'Manberg*

*THIS LETTER IS OFFICIAL CORRESPONDENCE. OPENING, REDIRECTING, OR OTHERWISE TAMPERING WITH THIS LETTER, IF NOT BY THE ADDRESSEE, IS A CAPITAL FELONY*

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*Hey Tubbo.*

*This is Tommy writing. I'm just as shocked as you are.*

*It's been a while, hasn't it? Since November 16th. Techno would say it's been 6 very long months, but I hear he's not too popular in L'Manberg. Something about unleashing 2 withers on the country?*

*Sorry, sorry. I know I shouldn't joke like this, given all the stress you're probably going through. ~~That I abandoned~~ That I left you in. ~~I'm sorry~~ That's what I should really be sorry about.*

*And you were right, Tubbo! When you said my family needed me more than L'Manberg. 6 months is more than enough time for some self reflection, you know? And I've come to realize I would have been a terrible government figure. The original plan was for me to be vice president, wasn't it?*

*Brash, naïve, newly traumatized and angry little Tommy Innit as the vice president of that fucking hellhole? I can't believe we ever thought that would be a recipe for anything but complete disaster.*

*I didn't mean that in a negative way. Well, I guess I did, but not towards you.*

*Sorry. Again.*

*I shouldn't be talking - writing - eh, whatever. Doesn't matter. I shouldn't be writing about L'Manberg like this, should I? You must love that country at least somewhat - probably very, very deeply - to put up with being its president. To endure all the stress, the entire world judging your every move. To sacrifice sleep and joy and your life, practically, to navigate a thankless job no one will ever understand the burden of.*

*Not even me, but I saw what the presidency did to Wilbur - and Wilbur wasn't dealing with a L'Manberg newly decimated with not one but two wars, with a populace on the brink of complete revolt, and with an unpopularity so high more time is spent on quashing fears and rumors than getting policies executed.*

*Wilbur didn't even care for L'Manberg the way you do. As much as I love him, it's something I have to admit - he created L'Manberg for the glory, not the freedom.*

*And again - I saw what the presidency did to him. Stripped him down to bleached out bone, left him a shivering mess crying into his pillows every night as the weight of leadership and expectations and phantom war terrors crushed his lungs to dust. He sang so desperately, at first, and then not at all anymore.*

*I shudder, Tubbo, to think of who I might meet if I were to be transported into your office this very instant. If you would be more skeleton than man, or more "President of New L'Manberg" than Tubbo Underscore, my eternal best friend. Ranboo, admittedly, did not have high scores for your mental state.*

*Speaking of which. Yeah, that's why I'm able to write this letter to you now. By the wildest fucking coincidence we met him at his "vacation spot". So now you know where we are. I trust you'll guard that knowledge fiercely, if our friendship has any of its foundations still holding strong? It's been such a long while, with so much changed - but perhaps foolishly, I still retain hope for the future between us.*

*Ranboo should be sending his own letter along with this. I'm still trying to wrap my head around the fact that you got married and I wasn't best man at the wedding, by the way. And that both of you are still children - seriously, this presidency thing is bad for you. But I know you won't turn back when you're so committed now, so please just keep that thought in mind. And try to take care of yourself.*

*By the way, I rate your husband a solid 8/10. He's older than me, so unfortunately I was still the youngest person to ever serve on L'Manberg's cabinet.*

*He's really skittish, too, though that's gotten better in the recent days. I had wanted to write you the letter the moment Ranboo told me the system existed, but as it unfortunately comes only when the shipping routes allow it, I had to wait a few more weeks for the first message.*

*Like I said, it's been a long six months. I guess our roads have truly diverged, huh?*

*But Techno once told me that even the furthest of roads will, given enough time and direction, merge together again. He may be a terrorist, but he's also an established author. And my brother. I'm inclined to believe him.*

*Mr. President, be aware that the great Tommy Innit has plans. I dearly hope this isn't the last time we'll ever see each other.*

*I've also enclosed a specimen from my new location. Just a little thing. I hope it finds you at least relatively well, and that it brings you some comfort in what are hopefully less stressful days of the presidency ahead - though I know it's rather futile to hope for such, given your current situation. What's the green bitch doing? I know there's far more happening behind the scenes than what the public ever realizes.*

*I can't truthfully say I'm faithfully yours anymore. I'm sorry. I lost that privilege when I decided to leave with Phil, with Techno, and with Wilbur. When I choose my family over L'Manberg, and by*

*extension you.*

*But I hope we're still friends. I hope you'll still talk to me. I hope we haven't grown so far apart as to be even worse than strangers to each other.*

*Miss you,*

*Tommy.*

## Chapter End Notes

heey remember at the very, very beginning in like chapter 2 or something i said tubbo was gonna show up eventually? :D

we're not there yet, but we're getting steps closer...

also if any of your guys have ever searched up how planting potatoes actually works... its fucking cursed, i tell you. there is crackfic potential in technoblade mutating like a potato. my journalism/english teacher said so (bc i asked him this question while working on the fic in his class and he searched the answer for me and then we had this whole conversation about the horror potential of people mutating like potatoes)

if you liked, let me know with a kudos or comment?

i reply to comments lives! [twitch](#)

[tumblr](#) and [twitter](#) for questions and art!

# dreams we can and can not be

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The portal is silent.

Well, of course it is. It's not lit yet, center spilling forth no more magic than the mossless stone behind. Obsidian flakes cling together through careful positioning alone, sharp little edges jutting out of every inch like it's already threatening to stab anyone who dares mess with what they do not understand.

The flint and steel presses coldly into Phil's palms, a careful counter.

"So," Techno says.

"That's a Nether portal," Tommy says back, eyes rolling ever so slightly. Clementine whines around his feet, having scabbled down the ravine after them in a way not unlike the Tommy of years ago would have done.

Wilbur reaches down and hoists her into his arms - mostly his right one.

They agree to leave the portal unlit for now.

There's no rush, after all. No rush at all.

~\*~

They care for the crops together, every day. It's mornings of banter, of light jokes and teasing. Subjects threaded light between them. Wilbur finds himself pulled into the mental fray, occasionally, but he can never truly rest.

It's okay though. Tommy seems happy enough with his performance, and so do Techno and Phil. He can still do better - mold his shapes to their desire, always pushing for perfection - but it'll have to do for now.

A work in progress, as they say. Sometimes, he wonders how he still has so many.

There's more physical work to be done around the area anyway, though, to worry so much. Monster-proofing, for one.

It's well known that monsters don't materialize in the light - it's why all the cities are perpetually shining, grids of torches extending to their outermost walls, and why smaller settlements know to build doors and walls that last. It's also well known that they hold little maneuverability, all shambling rags of flesh and ancient magic unable to break the mortal plane - hence, their wooden fencing.

The fences were built back when they first arrived, in hasty stretches of day as they couldn't waste time guarding against rotten teeth and arrows.

Techno has long grumbled about it being a terrible eyesore, however, and Phil echoes his sentiment. So does Tommy.

Wilbur's not in a position to be grumbling about much of anything, so he keeps his mouth shut on the whole issue. It doesn't mean he has no reservations, though - because he does, surprisingly.

He cares that when he stares toward the sunsets with arms cradled on the windowsill and Techno brushing against him, the view which should be magnificence personified with wilderness' gradients is instead blocked by wooden grains that sand him down, down, down into nothingness with cracked lights of mockery.

He cares that when the mated eagle pair which have taken the forest return to nest after a successful hunt, he has no way of viewing blood-splattered wings and the prey's as it still twitches, half-dead and half-paralyzed in their talons and in the throes of that primal, desperate screech for survival.

He cares that the world, open and free as it is before him, is still cut with a barrier in some manner, even if far more by the psychological. There is nothing stopping him from taking a sword and stepping beyond the protections, after all, barring perhaps the ever-hovering Techno insisting he stay back in fear of safety.

It is a selfish reason, he knows - he has his family, his life, and the town just a quick flight away.

But of course, as much as he doesn't deserve to protest the way his brothers do, he is still glad when they finally take down the barriers. For they have served their uses, and it is time for new ones.

There's a comparison to be made there, and Wilbur does. Unsurprisingly, it doesn't make him feel any better about himself.

Perhaps he should consult Techno about it. Give him something else to do around him beyond monotonously checking his older brother's not falling off more cliffs again.

But that's besides the point.

Their area of the mountain is raised up from the slopes like a giant's stone palm, ringed like a caldera, the cliff sides too sheer for anything but the most determined of mountain goats to climb. Phil chose the location well.

The monster threat, then, comes from the forest within. They can't light every possible darkness - an endeavor impossible physically, and too great a disturbance to the wildlife. So instead they must erect some barrier in the fences' place.

And that is what the four of them have been digging for the past week, with Wilbur's leg cast having come off a while ago and movement mostly returned to his arm.

It's a canal five feet wide, six feet deep, ringing the large, open area around the house. They've extended it a bit past the fence's original perimeter, to permit room for more crops and another small building.

Tiring work, of course, dull and monotone shuffling, but Wilbur's let himself fall into the abyss of his mind with such actions before.

So it's not all bad. He blinks once or twice, tunes out his dirt caked fingernails and the wind about to topple him over. And suddenly, he's curling beneath Phil's wings after a long day done.

It's harder to delve that deep now, however. His mind seems wired to latch any comment his family makes, like a scavenger hungering after dusty bits of bread blown his way.

His family finding one excuse or another to do his work for him doesn't help either. Something about "moderation". Techno goes so far as to write out each hour of time which he should be resting and carving that schedule down the handle of Wilbur's shovel.

A bit dramatic, but again - who is he to talk about dramatics?

The exercise does feel better when he paces it, though.

Eventually the canal is finalized, patted down and layered with slabs of stone here or there. One end connects via another, narrower trench to the forest's river, the other to the stream near their house. There's only a few feet of dirt separating the flow of water - and the river connection is already starting to leak.

They're now there, gathered around the last blockade. The river dances smooth, bubbling, through the forest like it has since far before they arrived. Down the cliffsides in some unseen waterfall. Wilbur spots the occasional glint of scales, rainbow whips in the sunbeams.

Phil is knee deep and barefoot in the water and so is Tommy, both hovering over the final dirt wall between them and the dry canal.

Wilbur, however, stands safely on a bed of soft leaves two feet from the shore. Techno is next to him, and neither have any illusions as to why.

"Right. It's time," Phil says. The blockade between the canal and other stream has been torn down already - but as that one goes in the downriver direction, all the water itself will have to flow from the river.

"Tommy should do the honors," Wilbur finds himself saying. Tommy grins up at him.

"Of course," Phil agrees.

Tommy has the shovel ready anyways, so it's a bit of a moot point.

He's not sure why he said it.

Tommy shovels out a section of dirt, flung into the forest brush beyond. And then another, and another.

And slowly the canal pools with water. A trickle, then a stream, and then a tiny flood, all controlled in volume and speed with Techno's precise calculations having ensured their optimal positioning.

A few fish slip by as well, soon to be darting either into the stream, or a territory in the canal just like how Wilbur's family is doing now in the mountains. He doesn't know. Maybe they'll be easier to catch this way.

Watering crops has become less of a hassle as well. And of course, finally - the fences are down, and they rest assured knowing any hungry mobs will now be drowned if they approach, the puppeteering magic completely dissolved in the streaming mountain water.

It's a tiny victory, but one nonetheless. Another step forward for their home.

~\*~

“And this one’s name is Cardinal,” Tommy says, finger jabbed at the red fish with a splotched black underbelly, like it had been dipped in crude oil.

“Why are you naming the fish?” Phil asks, peering into the reservoir as well. It’s the only one of their water sources blocked off from the rest, the channel dug from the canal to it having been jammed with a large stone slab. It’s also been dubbed the “fish pond,” because Tommy’s thrown at least two dozen live fish into the rather sizable pond of water.

Techno thinks it’s rather nice, actually. They’ve installed two benches on either side, along with bits of railing and greenery. Lily pads and algae float along the surface, seagrass growing from the beneath. As it’s towards the edge of their area, a huge oak tree also towers above them - a perpetually waving shade Clementine likes to chase with the wind. The now blooming flowers, both wild and ones they had planted earlier in the spring, dot more color around them.

“Fish deserve names too,” Tommy says. Clementine raises her head from his lap and barks, seemingly in agreement.

“Then don’t hog all the fish naming to yourself,” Techno says. He plops down on the other wide of Wilbur and blinks down at the twisting, splashing shapes. A soft paw bats at his chin.

“This one’s Jay,” he eventually decides, pointing to an indigo-blue wave of scales. “If we’re naming them after birds now.” The pawing grows more insistent.

“Guys. We eat them for dinner every other night.” Wilbur gives the pond a skeptical glance.

“And this one’s name is Sally,” Tommy says.

“Oh fu- whatever.”

“That’s-”

“-and that’s Dickface,” Wilbur deadpans. He doesn’t even indicate a fish, but instead just kicks the water with a boot.

“You know we’re never remembering which is which, right?” Phil asks.

Techno startles as Clementine springs like a cricket from Tommy’s lap to his, chasing a ticklish circle before rubbing against his chest with a soft rumble.

“She really likes you today.” Tommy blinks. “Normally she only does that with me at night.”

Techno shrugs, patting down floofs of soft fur. A warm feeling burns in his chest again at each touch, like he’s the one being caressed - and alright, that’s just weird.

Phil would - well. Phil would call him “touch-starved” if he knew this was happening. How increasingly often Techno imagines seeking the beneath of his father’s wings again, about sliding like some final, secret puzzle piece into the embraces Tommy and Wilbur now start every day with.

But it’s not an issue. Not - not now. Techno’s not sure it’ll ever be the time, even with Wilbur’s increasing suspicion, but at least Clementine’s here and she fills the void almost fully, wholly, for just a few soft moments.

It’ll have to be enough.



~\*~

There's a few more renovations to be made, things to be built, but only one which would drastically alter anything.

A chicken coop. They do a double take when Tommy of all people suggests the idea.

"So we really are just running a farm," Techno says as they lay out the foundations. He retracts the measuring tape and marks out the locations for support beams - five inches, 10 inches, and so on. It's familiar, grounding work, having already been done once with their house.

"Pretty much," Phil laughs. "I'm too used to this. But it's not like it'll be a full on barn or anything - just a few chickens. Maybe ducks."

"Right, right," Wilbur says. His expression's wistful, almost, as he stares at Tommy sawing into planks in a set, steady tempo.

Techno wonders what conversation must have been missed between them, in the very early days when the house was just being built and they had all been so, so oblivious.

The coop is built and prepared faster than even they could have expected. Padded down with hay, doorways securely hinged, everything tested to ensure it's all waterproof.

It's a bright, summery morning when they're done. Springtime almost over, everything flourishes of green.

Phil hangs a few dark feathers on the roof edges, apparently some tradition back in his previous settlements. Tommy then follows up by taking a piece of charcoal and drawing a frowny face on the walls - "to ward off bad dreams for the chickens," according to him. Then he has to spend five minutes holding Clementine back from licking the image clean off.

Wilbur merely laughs and hums a little tune.

Techno has no idea what any of that is about, but he's learned to simply go along with his family's little intricacies over the years. He himself has no ritual to conduct, no offer to deliver, but instead announces they have to time head for the town.

To, well. Purchase some chickens.

And laughing, they concede to the point. It's still so strange to Techno - but perhaps comforting as well. Unlike the structures they build, the nations they live in, surely (surely?) they'll never leave each other behind. Again.

~\*~

For the first time since arriving here, it's warm enough for Tommy to wear nothing but a shirt and thin green pants, furless leather boots. And of course, the cloak Phil had gifted him for his birthday.

It wraps around his shoulders almost every day now, actually - there's a spring to his step, an almost bouncy float when he walks with it. He's measurably faster too, lighter and safer with the enchantments.

And the feeling's *fun*, alright? It's fun too, so why not?

He's allowed to have fun.

Plus, there's always their trips down to Sanctuary. Which, nowadays, Tommy has no hesitation diving off the cliff ledges down to, cloak fanned out behind him, held out and aloft by the shimmering magic of the End.

Like every other time the wind in his face feels fucking *amazing*, and like every other time. Tommy lands with a small thud and whoop, dancing in his leafy whirlwind for seconds of elation as the furious pounding of the freedom ebbs back out of his veins.

They're here for the chickens this time, of course, so Techno joins him with his normal, plebeian elytra and Phil flies down with Wilbur still in his arms - the injuries have basically healed, but he still needs some time for proper readjustment.

And maybe they're waiting a little longer than they need too, but hey! There's no rush.

Tommy waits for Techno to pack his elytra back into the ender chest, which Phil then shrinks back down - and then he's off, leading down the familiar trail to Sanctuary.

They visit the town far more than any of them had initially expected it to. It's mostly Tommy nowadays, joining Ranboo for one thing or another - mostly making a mess of Hbomb's kitchen, or messing around the gardens and occasionally annoying the hell out of a Pete trying to practice his parkour.

There's also the occasional serious conversation, usually speculations about Tubbo's situation. Or, some journey into hidden worlds they've previously left unexplored.

Which is a fancy way of saying: for such a tiny town, Sanctuary has a lot of fucking weirdos and even more weirdness to figure out in its locations. One of which includes their library. Tommy has promised Ranboo they would go trawling through more old texts today, and seeing as they have pretty much noon to sunset the chickens can probably wait until the later half of the day.

"Promise you'll be back in the town square two hours before sunset?" Wilbur asks.

"Yep," Tommy says. He laughs, swinging an arm around Ranboo's shoulders. "You guys know me - good 'ol reliable Tommy."

It's meant as a joke, but Phil's expression softens into something distant at the words. Tommy blinks.

Techno clears his throat. "We'll just - uh. Regroup here later then. I actually want to practice more movement in the gardens."

"I'll watch," Wilbur offers. "Plus, I want to make a list of which species are there. Maybe get some seeds." Phil seems to snap out whatever haze he's in, and glances between them and Tommy.

"Well, I - I was planning on checking out the recent trade ships that had arrived," he says.

So they all have their own plans for the day. Tommy can't say he's particularly surprised about that either - there's so much to *do* in life, even when they're not fighting wars or running countries.

Especially when they're not fighting wars or running countries. Huh.

"Well, Ranboo and I will be off then," he says. "Bye."

“Y-Yeah,” Ranboo says. “Bye - um, Mr. Philza, Mr. Techno, Mr. Soot.”

Tommy chokes down a laugh. Ranboo has a rather hilarious aversion to calling the rest of his family by their names, but the few times he has... Tommy had forgotten he does *that*.

Techno clearly had too, expression like if Clementine had suddenly licked his eyes (and Tommy almost winces at the idea of the poor girl left alone in the house, but at least it's just a few hours). If only that comical shock is what history students are presented with when they study the Blood God's deeds, instead of whatever terrorized paintings artists have imagined in their place.

Phil gives Ranboo a wave back, while Wilbur simply snorts and edges closer to Techno.

“Time to go,” Tommy says, because he'd rather not have to deal with this awkwardness any longer than he needs to. Ranboo nods beside him, far too eager.

Well. Time to read some dusty old documents.

~\*~

The library's quiet today. Pearl alone is slumped over the central desk - Tommy's almost fooled into thinking she's asleep, though the too-tight grip she has on a quill gives her away. She gives them a thumbs up as they pass by.

He and Ranboo have been here once or twice - Ranboo originally interested in the books, and Tommy quickly getting sucked along by their contents as well.

Because - well. There's some fucking cool stuff around here. Including information that might even be useful one day.

The documents they unroll on a table today come in a series of notes by some geezer who's now long been rotting bones in the ground. It's what he recorded that's interesting, in ink nearly faded to nothing on rawhide parchment.

*“The Dream is an interesting creature unlike any I've ever studied before,”* Ranboo reads aloud. Tommy pushes against his shoulder, trying to get a better view.

Here it is. A primary source on who - and what - Dream might be. Not just the current one, but the entire lineage in general.

*“She cuts a beautiful, striking figure, tall as the strongest of axemen-”*

Tommy nearly chokes.

“There've been just as many female Dreams as male ones,” Ranboo points out. “That's just - however their genetics works. I don't know why you're surprised.”

“Well, I *know*, ” Tommy says. “It's just-”

The Dream has always been just - *Dream*, to him. Master manipulator. A greasy, eely creature that sized Wilbur against the cold walls of madness. A fucking *bastard*. He knows on some logical level that Dream has predecessors, who had to have been different from him - probably less of a dick, given how low the bar is set - but still.

It's a strange comparison to wrap his head around. To go from the Dream he knows so well to whoever was in his place centuries, perhaps even a millennia or two ago. They'll have to check the date.

Ranboo clears his throat.

*"Like all her previous kind she has the traditional veil of green over her hair, all the way down to her knees, and the pearly mask over her expression - this one, set in the face of a Myndcrak-style drama performer. A cloak covers everything else, save the occasional reaching hands gloved in funeral white.*

*On only one occasion did I see any part of her bare to the world - wisps of blond hair beneath her veil, a few tinged white, when the wind blew a bit too strongly."*

"This is fucking weird," Tommy says. He's not sure he wants to go down that path of thought, actually.

"You don't say? I've had to deal with Dream too," Ranboo retorts. He unrolls a bit more parchment.

*"She is purportedly one of the oldest Dreams in history, having killed her maker two centuries ago. But there is a son now, almost fully grown though rarely ever seen - speculations say she does not have long left.*

*There is an ethereal grace she brings with her presence in the Dream Kingdom courts - supposedly, an attempt to rectify her predecessor's habit of hosting, and I quote, 'parties of wildly inappropriate conduct.'"*

"You know, Dream's actually a pretty big stickler for the rules," Ranboo says. "His kingdom's rules, that is. He never argues against the traditions."

"That doesn't matter if the traditions just amount to 'I have the final say in everything.'"

"Yeah, but..." Ranboo hesitates, and ultimately falls silent on that line. He turns back to the parchment.

Weird. Tommy knows there's much more left unsaid, but he elects to ignore that for now.

*"I had come to the Dream's court to answer a few chief questions the world has about its ruler - questions that I know many have failed to answer before me.*

*But I must give it a try anyway. Besides - their bread is simply divine. There is something special about Dream Kingdom wheat, I must insist. Perhaps the soil?*

"Perhaps the abundance of shit Dream produces."

"Tommy. Please."

*The first question around the Dream is - just where did they come from? How do their bodies work?*

*The Dream is an immortal creature - not unkillable, even by normal methods, but aging does not chip away their body's dexterity. No one knows why, or how, or where their origins might connect to other immortal creatures such as the now extinct End avians-*"

"Wait, is that what Philza is?" Ranboo asks.

“Duh,” Tommy snorts.

“But it says here they’re all-”

“This guy’s fucking wrong, then. Keep reading, I wanna learn something new.”

Ranboo shrugs. Tommy has the distinct feeling Phil will be answering a lot of questions later.

*“-but that is not the main concern for me this trip.*

*No, here I endeavor to find the secrets of their lineage. It is also widely known that the vast majority of Dreams have died at the hands of their child, who then takes over their position. For this reason there has never been a single instance of a Dream having siblings.*

*Why do Dreams have children in the first place then, if it will inevitably lead to their demise? Why do all Dreams kill their parents?*

*And, admittedly most important of all to me - how does their reproduction system work in the first place? Not a single time in history has a Dream taken a spouse, or been shown or confirmed to have had intimate relations. A child is usually announced to the world after they have killed their parent, or in a few rare instances, in the adolescent years their species - if they can even be called a species - are confirmed to have.”*

“If I didn’t know any better I’d say this guy’s interested for more than just scientific reasons,” Tommy comments. Ranboo chokes down another warbly noise.

“But you - you *don’t* know that!”

“Exactly, Ranboo.”

“Dear Hypixel,” Ranboo mutters. “I really, really don’t want to think about - ugh. Ew.”

“You know, this does mean any day Dream’s child could just - up and stab him or something,” Tommy says.

He’s kind of jealous, actually.

“As much fun as that would be, at least we *know* this Dream,” Ranboo points out. “A new one would be completely unpredictable.”

Tommy shrugs.

“Dream’s like - what, 60 years old? That’s still not too long compared to some others.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Ranboo says. “Probably no Dream murders for a while yet.”

Tommy wonders what would happen if someone killed Dream, and it turns out he *didn’t* have a backup child yet. No one’s done it before.

But there’s a first for everything, isn’t there?

It’s not like he’ll ever actually try - too unrealistic a goal, and Phil would probably chain him to Techno before he let it happen - but it’s fun to think about, regardless.

“What else is there?” Tommy asks. “We haven’t really learned much new besides that this guy probably had the hots for-”

“I am going to keep reading,” Ranboo interrupts. “This next part was written a bit later.”

*“Alas, I was unable to convince the Dream to indulge my questions - but I have confirmed a piece of information about the Dreams.”*

*Apparently, their outward appearances are all near identical - save for differences in sexual characteristics, of course.”*

“Too much of a pussy to say dicks and-”

“Tommy. Please.”

*“I feel my welcome here has sorely expired - perhaps, I could return if the next Dream is more receptive to my questioning? For now I leave these notes entrusted in the care of Novixl’s central library, the home of my curiosity and to whom I am eternally indebted to, and hope they may be of use to future generations of researchers. For now, it is onto the next adventure for me.”*

“What a weirdo,” Tommy says. And they didn’t learn much of use after all - though more confirmation that Dream could be killed normally is always nice. There’ve been a few doubts about that recently.

“Yeah,” Ranboo says. “These notes are-”

He pulls out his memory book and flips to a page.

“About 600 years ago.”

Then the son mentioned couldn’t be Dream. The current one, that is.

“So this one’s a bit of a bust,” Ranboo sighs. “Nothing really useful for Tubbo.”

“No,” Tommy murmurs. “Is there anything else around here?”

Ranboo shakes his head, looking down.

“I asked and searched myself too. This is the only source that could have given us anything useful about Dream - not much like this gets sailed across the ocean.”

“L’Manberg probably has way more documents than this,” Tommy muses. “Tubbo would have more luck searching there, really.”

“He’s tried,” Ranboo says. “It’s - uh. We didn’t find much useful either, beyond a few speculations about Dream already having a child.”

Pity. But speaking of which-

“When’s Tubbo’s reply letters coming?” he asks. “It’s been a few weeks.”

He’s held off asking until now, trying to exercise that patience everyone had always called him out for lacking. But surely it couldn’t hurt to ask just once?

“Probably very soon,” Ranboo shrugs. “They take a while sometimes. But the birds fly better in the summer winds, so it shouldn’t be as long next time.”

Right, right. He - he can be patient. He can wait. It’s not like Tubbo’s reply would - well.

He doesn’t know what Tubbo’s reply will be like. Not the Tubbo of now. And he really doesn’t want to make predictions.

Tommy leans away from the table, frowning a bit before suddenly perking up.

“Hey, do you want to go check out if that crab we tied up a few days ago has died yet?”

“Tommy, that crab is - uh. It’s definitely dead by now. And probably eaten.”

That's not the point. But of course, Tommy keeps his mouth shut about that as well.

“Race you to the shore! And no teleporting!”

He’s out the library too fast to catch Ranboo’s response.

~\*~

They do eventually regroup to obtain chickens, Techno’s hair now significantly more frazzled than when Tommy last saw him. He and Phil spend a good minute laughing over the wired mess, though Wilbur remains strangely silent. His eyes are a distant glaze Tommy really, really doesn’t want to deal with again, but to his relief it quickly clears.

There’s a few chicken vendors in the town - just people willing to sell a few young hens, really. By Hbomb’s recommendation they end up at the house of someone named Lizzie, who Tommy recalls having exchanged a few passing words with before.

The door opens before he even has a chance to knock.

“Oh, hello!” Lizzie brushes a curl of purple hair away from her eyes. “Hbomb told me you’re here for chickens?”

Phil inclines a nod. Tommy shifts next to him. Wilbur and Techno are a few steps behind, no doubt feeling awkward for entirely different reasons.

Lizzie steps out and pushes the door shut with a boot behind her.

“The chicken coop’s out back,” she says.

They’re led to, very expectedly, a coop with an outside area fenced. A dozen or so chickens are picking their heads around the patches of grass and hay. Most are brown, though a few are white and two are a cornflower blue that has even Wilbur muttering a “what the fuck?” behind him.

“Blue chickens?” Phil asks, raising an eyebrow as one totters past his boots with a fluttering of her wings, leaves fluffs of pale blue feathers in her wake.

“Wait ‘til you see Scott’s black ones,” Lizzie laughs. “These aren’t for sale though. I have a few younger hens for you to choose from.”

They follow her to a separate, also fenced off area where 5 hens - three brown and two white - are nestled among a bed of hay.

“Not sure how many you guys want, so I just got a few,” she shrugs.

“We’ll take them all,” Phil says.

They had discussed this shortly before, and decided 4 or 5 would be a good number. Enough for a steady supply of eggs, but not too many to care for.

Gold coins are exchanged, hens picked up - Phil and Techno both with 2 in each arm and Tommy cuddling the last one, currently plucking the edges of his cloak with curious clucks. Wilbur glances between them and his left arm - no longer in a sling, but still too early to be straining - and stays silent.

It’s rather awkward to carry a chicken while elytra flying, but Tommy manages well enough. Techno does too with a bit more fidgeting and grumbling, which Tommy considers a secret win. One of them has clearly had more practice.

They all have to make return trips - Phil still flies Wilbur up the mountain, and then a hen while Tommy and Techno come back for the two others. In the end it works out well enough.

They have five chickens in their coop as the sun begins its setting. Phil and Techno manage a quick dinner of seared potatoes and rabbit meat. They scrub themselves down with buckets of water in the washroom, and by the end of it all Tommy finds himself asleep almost as soon as his head hits the pillow.

The world is soft, and warm, and safe - and then, it is not.

When he wakes the next morning, Tommy almost, *almost*, fools himself into thinking he’s forgotten that night’s dreams.

## Chapter End Notes

[fanart!!](#) Tommy in the white sweater Philza made for him!

hey look there’s dream lore... wonder what that might lead too...

hope you enjoyed the chapter - if you did let me know with a kudos or comment, and thanks for reading!

and don’t worry, tubbo and ranboo pov will come eventually... i just have soo much to write and AP World is trying to stab me with

chicken colors were selected based on my farm in stardew valley



## and i can't say that i, wasted my time

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

*“We all move on.*

*Some faster than others.*

*We all know-”*

The string screeches to a horrible halt as edged metal clinks harsh against his ears.

“Sorry,” Phil says from the kitchen counter. He kneels slow as a bow, and picks the knife off the floor just as gingerly.

There’s something to be said there. Wilbur parts the curtains once again.

“It’s fine,” he settles on. Usually a safe option.

The small smile resumes on Phil’s expression, though tinged with downturned concern. It seems everything returns to concern now.

After a moment held like ancient tenutos, he finally speaks again.

“If anything’s... distressing you, you can always say.”

“You want me to say,” Wilbur murmurs.

His limbs are suddenly dead as stone, layers of frost his fingers struggle to crack through.

He sets the guitar back into its case on the table.

“We want what’s best for you.” Phil sets the knife back on its cutting board. Wipes his hands down with a damp towel.

And then, he’s pressing against Wilbur on the couch.

“We’re not always right - or even usually right,” he continues. “But just - you can talk to us, Wilbur. We’ll try our best to work things out. You know that, don’t you?”

*Yes, the response parts through the waves. His vision is black and he’s wading unfettered, unanchored. I know it too well.*

“I’m sorry,” Wilbur says. Despite the part of him that protests, that shivers with terror and rejection, he turns and buries his head in the crook of Phil’s wing. It slides over to encompass him further into its curving ocean.

“I am too,” Phil says.

An arm wraps around Wilbur’s shoulders, like a fireplace concentrated. He stifles a sob brought to reality.

“It’s okay,” Phil’s voice continues to say, soft as cured wool and brushing like the feathers. Like the - his-

Wilbur chokes down another sob, another gasp. His face isn’t wet yet, is it? Surely he’s calmed the tides. Smoothed out that cloud of choking gravel, sinking sand scraping bare all the undesirable muddle he should be long past slogging through.

Why is he like this? Form still thin as icicle sculptures in the dawning sunlight? Can’t he hold himself better by now?

He should be able to hold himself better by now, not unravel like burning flags at the slightest fur-lined trigger.

But instead here he is twisting all horrid and wrought thin as web lines against his father and his shame. Forcing vigil still, the same bridge bending between the beginning and now and everything else a mirage in between.

“I - Dad,” Wilbur whispers, a tiny keening sound, again a child small enough to drown himself in a coat of blue the tint of Antarctic ice at sunset.

Phil’s embrace tightens. It’s warm, so warm.

It’s safety. A safety he’s long since forsaken. Why is he back here again? Swimming a different revolution around the searing lives of those he’s wronged?

Who is he to say the past few months have been real? True? Or buried dead as his dreams in the deep, dark valleys where serenity finally hums?

“Wilbur?” A burning touch against his cheek. “Wilbur? Can you breathe with me?”

It is instinct that directs his ears to his father’s chest, and surely nothing more. Instinct that forces his lungs in and out in tandem.

“Wilbur?”

“I’m fine,” he whimpers. He’s not sure he’s ever heard himself sound so weak.

“It’s alright if you’re not.”

He’s already taken so much. But this is the endeavor his family has set themselves upon, and the greatest insult would be to make it more difficult.

And so he nods, and stays quiet, and manages to force down his sobs once more.

“Did - is there something wrong?” Phil asks.

Wilbur stares deeper into the darkness, eyes glassed with contradiction.

“I want to help you, Wilbur. Please. You’re not alone.”

He’s not. He never was, really. They’re always there and never does he listen or approach or speak of the unspeakable which must be spoken.

“It’s nothing,” he says. A quiver in his lips, in his jaw, down to jolt his thundering heart.

“Doesn’t seem like nothing.”

A rustle. The reordering of the world in the chimes of loose feathers.

“I’ve done terrible things,” he says, reordered with it.

“We all have,” Phil hums. “Besides Tommy. And I can’t exactly get mad at you for war crimes, can I?”

He meant that, yes, but also-

“I begged you to kill me,” he whispers. And he dares grip further into the ocean, each drop a featherlet so soft and safe and warm.

Against all logic, the curtain doesn’t part. It only sinks closer.

“You weren’t thinking clearly,” Phil says. A hand presses against Wilbur’s hair, burning like the sun. “You needed - need - help, Wilbur.”

“But the revolution was my idea.”

Phil sighs, a deeply trenched sound. Wilbur quashes down another flare of panic at the possibility that he’s disappointed again, failed once more for the parade that’s already stretching into the oblivion behind him.

“It was my fault too. I should have known better than to run an empire with you so young. I gave you... unreasonable expectations.”

“You couldn’t have known,” he says, everything faint. Against himself, an arm wraps around Phil’s shoulders as well. He sinks into the warmth, lets himself drift into soft haziness. “You’re not - like us. There’s no way you could have known.”

Once again, Phil only shifts to close the distance between them, the cold and sharp and all their past misunderstandings crushed by the burning, burning warmth.

“You couldn’t have known either,” he says. The hand in Wilbur’s hair rises. “What matters is that we’re fixing problems now.”

It’s an unsaid invitation. Request, even, delivered in the gentle, murmuring waves, the ends of notes feathered. Wilbur shudders in its gasp with his vision black as night and the revolution dragged into place amidst the endless void - and then he’s lunging close with the desperation of a man throwing himself forth into the terror before hesitation can weave its threads any tighter.

“We are,” he chokes out, the desperate last scramble for any semblance of resolution by a man long past dead. “We - I’m sorry-”

He strangles another sob, and falls silent as a newly cut lamb. The ocean envelops him once more, this time so warm, *so warm and fiery and damning as the Nether’s deepest regions and fuck he wants to lose himself in it so much.*

“-right,” Phil murmurs to him, voice the waves’ gentle lulling, quicklava flood behind Wilbur’s eyes and blood. “It’s alright. You’ll be alright.”

The pressure on his head tightens its grip, guides him down and he collapses into it like a ragdoll, still shuddering. Another warbled apology dies on his lips

“Dad,” he says instead. “Dad.”

“I’m here,” Phil murmurs. “Whatever you need, I’m here. I won’t leave again.”

*He won’t leave again.*

Wilbur curls - or some part of him does. His body is floating detached. Connections too limp for direction, but it’s curling in regardless, and there are nets to receive him. There are nets to entangle around him, and they are burning.

“I’m - I can do better, can’t I?” he somehow says, so tiny.

He can still fix - some things. Not all, he’s fucked up too much for that - but some things, surely? Isn’t that how he’s been clawing his way through each dawn and dusk?

“Of course. But not just that, Wilbur.” Lava trails down his cheek, burning and burning, a promise branded in its wake. Phil hums a valley five-note tune to part the curtain.

“You can *be* better too.”

The ocean crashes over his head.

He’s doing better. He has to. For his family.

*But you can be better.*

The darkness creeps forth like the moonlight’s absence. And he’s falling, chest evened and everything in their own wheeling revolutions.

*You can be better.*

*Because. Because...*

*Serenity is a state of mind.*

~\*~

“Have you an interest in Whitelisted?”

Fingers pause, settle weighted strangely upon a spine coarse as pighide.

“Mayhaps,” Techno hums. “Why are you asking?”

The asker isn’t Pearl, who usually takes this shift. She’s another keeper of the library.

“You’ve been browsing some of their works for... a while.” The librarian reaches over her desk and plucks one of said works from the shelf.

It’s *Antarctic Voyages*, one of the texts he wrote during his tenure as Phil’s right hand man as they raised an empire from the ground to the skies and let it all crumble just as quickly. The cover a faded blue sky with the black shapes of two soaring ravens.

“I’ve read... some of them,” Techno says, each word weighted against the other in their conveyance.

“Stunning, aren’t they? Already on their way to being considered some of history’s greatest classics, and the author’s not even dead yet!” The librarian chuckles, and guides the book open like a blossoming flower. Traces the blocky letters’ edges, a smile curved one direction. “You should absolutely read the rest.”

Techno gives one of the noncommittal grunts he’s perfected for situations such as this.

He’s read them all anyway, since - well. Whitelisted is *his* pen name. And he’d really rather not revisit his past mistakes again.

Somehow, his traitorous eyes wander towards pages splayed so clear before him anyway.

*Those present at the Battle of Mourner’s Mountain remember, above the clang and clamor of iron death - hail. Hail thick as fists and harder than diamond smashing holes in the skulls of unfortunate-*

Techno tears his eyes away again and smooths down a shudder. How any publishing house accepted *that* manuscript for publishing, he has no idea.

“Fascinating read, isn’t it? Whitelisted must be an exceptionally well traveled person.”

“Their writings carry that implication, yes.” Techno glances back to the shelf. It’s the closest to the librarian’s seat at the table - and, now that he’s paying more attention, contains among other books a copy of almost every work he’s published.

Which, of course, pales in number compared to other authors of similar reputation.

They’re not even that good. Every line scratchy with imperfections he can never gloss over, contents pieced of long-known doctrines masqueraded as his own.

The world has been wondering why Whitelisted’s previous trickle of writings have dried up completely in the past few years. They’ll probably never get the answer - though at least they’ll have an absolutely riveting guide to potato farming soon.

Techno has wondered, on some nights in beds stained with blood of his and his opponents, crusted old as lifespans or bleeding new as moon lily flowers, if he should kill Whitelisted completely. There’s no point in a creative whose purpose is destruction, after all.

He almost did, just before the 16th of November. Wrote a shakily scrawled draft posing as Whitelisted’s nonexistent sister and all, announcing his silent and timely death in the recapture of Manberg.

But - well. The ocean is rather lacking in printing presses, and they could never stay long enough in any of the cities.

And now he’s writing again. Some appeasement for his family - and for that shriveled part of himself he long thought had died. Perhaps it’s still dead and Techno is merely necromancing what does not belong to the likes of him, an endeavor doomed to claw his hopes into a rotten pile of blood and gutted glory.

Meanwhile, his present company continues.

“Such great use of their talents! And the variety’s really good too. Their nonfiction documents on wars especially.”

Oh. The librarian’s still talking, and Techno still standing with his head tilted in the semblance of attention.

“You can tell how much attention to detail is put into everything. All that meticulous research and personal inquiries. Most authors like them would just rest on their laurels and stay cooped up in their fancy mansions all day, you know?”

“I do,” Techno exhales. Because he does.

But blades are forged for battle, and have no prerogative for rest.

“It’s really admirable. A shame they don’t do public appearances, but it does make sense. All the travel would make them a target otherwise.”

Techno gives a “hm”.

Should he add anything onto that? Try to engage in conversation, strange as it is to discuss his own works with a stranger who, against all logic, exalts them as good literature?

But the librarian seems content to chat on.

“Imagine,” she says, her eyes reflecting the lamplights above and iris gray with the marching contemplation Techno’s seen on the most resilient of weathered soldiers, “having the ability to devote your life to an art, and honing it so beautifully with every word.”

“Whitelisted’s writings are far from perfect,” Techno feels strangely compelled to point out. “There’s been many critiques of writing inconsistencies, and purple prose crops up as a frequent problem.”

“Nothing is perfect,” the librarian bats back. “But theirs are far closer to perfection than the vast majority of other published material, and I think most of the critiques are just nitpicking for the sake of having something to criticize. Also-”

She plucks a silken bookmark from beneath her desk and slides it into *Antarctic Voyages*’ open page before closing it shut again. “If people really curl at Whitelisted’s heaviness of prose, they’ll fall on faint when they read some of his contemporaries’ stuff.”

“Maybe,” Techno sighs. “The sentiments are still there, though.”

He lets his hand fall from the book spines. If he unfocuses he can glimpse the trails of blood bleeding from the letters, cut dead by his bladed skin sullied with the edge of killing.

The librarian stares as well, eyes flashing darker in the flick of a moment it takes for a man to bleed out from his throat slashed right.

“Can’t please everyone, and the best writers never please themselves.” She pauses and slides *Antarctic Voyages* close to her chest. “But they try. I think it’s an incredibly admirable thing, what Whitelisted and people like them are doing. They bring life and wonder to people who would have had no avenue to it.”

“Such an easily abused system.”

“Indeed, but also one that has done much good. And Whitelisted is clearly aware of the world he writes in, and writes for. The perceptiveness is registered with such clarity in every phrase, especially on the topic of wars and violence.”

*Because violence is the only universal language*, Techno thinks, bitterness a familiar companion in his throat. Cultures export nothing else so understandable.

*And that’s what translators are for, right?* After all, his works have been printed in more languages than he can name.

“It takes a certain awareness, yes,” Techno finally says, the reek of death like miasma in his mouth.

A certain awareness, indeed.

He looks at his hands, skin pale as birch paper. Clean only in its outermost appearances.

Blood drips from them, always and always will.

“Quality of wording is subjective, but I believe it is the successful expression of intent that matters.”

Rounded edges press against his palm. It’s a book, Techno realizes in minute ticks, cover red as blood with a single green leaf. Thin as a dagger. He doesn’t need to check the spine to know which one it is.

“Whitelisted is one of few authors who has written in a way which changes not just the world around me and others for the better, but the way we perceive the world as well,” the librarian says. She smiles, leaning back. “And I think that’s the most beautiful thing one can create through the art of literature.”

~\*~

*Tommy*

*Sanctuary, Northeastern Coast, Novixl*

*TAMPERING WITH THIS LETTER, IF NOT BY THE ADDRESSEE, WILL RESULT IN IN-BUILT CONSEQUENCES.*

*Tommy,*

*I hope ~~this message finds you in good health and spirits~~ you’re doing well! It was a really big shock when I got your letter, since you disappeared with your dad off too - well, I guess Sanctuary? And Ranboo happened to be going there too. Wow.*

*There’s a lot to say, Tommy. Probably in contrast to you, I’ve learned the utility of denying these things instead of confronting them. Politics is a strange game of contradictions, or so the Captain Sparklez tells me.*

*Speaking (or writing?) of which! I know you’re worried about how being New L’Manberg’s president has affected me. Not great, Tommy. I won’t lie about that. But like we both acknowledge - what else can I do?*

*I'm glad Ranboo has more people to support him, though. I trust Hbomb enough, but he doesn't understand the way you do. You were on L'Manberg's cabinet for a while, after all.*

*I do miss him a lot. I tell him so in my letters, but I try to hold back. Ranboo doesn't need to feel any more guilty than he already does. I was the one who forced the marriage.*

*But Tommy, I miss you too. I miss a lot of people, even the ones who are still around. I miss who they used to be. Fundy was so bright and eager in the original revolution, remember? He was just two years older than us. Now he's Vice President - and don't get me wrong, he's a good one. A great one, even, someone I can rely on despite his previous unpopularity. But he's cracking under the strain just like the rest of us.*

*Now that New L'Manberg has more allies, and is restructuring the army and navy, we're a bit more evenly matched against Dream. Still nowhere near their level, but my analysts tell me we could reasonably hold a defense for a few weeks.*

*So it's working out.*

*But it can also fall apart so easily. I don't know what to do most of the time and I never know what'll happen. Whether any change I make, however well-intentioned, will be another factor in our downfall.*

*The alliance with the Sparklez Kingdom was unpopular, even if we have little other way to gain a large enough defending army. I know letting in foreign troops rarely ends well in history. But better the Captain's men than Dream's, surely? He was gearing for an invasion at the time. What else could I have done?*

*That move had people denounce me as weak. Weaker than I already am. Which is true, really.*

*It's laughable. The President of L'Manberg is a staggering, half-blind child. His Vice President is the traitor who burned down the flag, son of the other traitor who blew up the country.*

*I would laugh too, but I'm too tired for that. I've long since realized why Wilbur was drunk so much during his presidency.*

*Don't worry. I don't have a drinking problem.*

*Okay, maybe a bit. But Niki forcibly takes away the bottle after a while. It's fine.*

*I know the Niki you knew would have never let me near the bottle in the first place. But I think she pities me enough to let me blank out once in a while. It is the most popular way to avoid your problems, or so I've heard.*

*From the sound of it you and Ranboo are doing a lot better. I'm glad. Please trust me when I say I want to be with you two so, so badly. But I can't, I just can't. Someone has to make these choices and it's unfair to anyone else to not take the responsibility.*

*I hope your family matters are going well too. I don't know Philza that well, but you and Wilbur always spoke of him fondly as a father. He should have been there to stop you from going into the war for L'Manberg's Revolution, in my very flawed opinion, but I guess we all have our regrets.*

*If you're still living with Technoblade then I guess you've forgiven him for what he's done? Or at least enough? I can't say I have, but I don't hold a grudge either. I mainly can't bring myself to care*



*anymore, which is better than most of New L'Manberg's citizens. They were calling for hunting him down and executing him in the beginning.*

*I think the death toll of the festival and withers combined was like... a few hundred? Maybe a little over a thousand. I can see where they're coming from.*

*And those rockets. Those rockets were - well, like torture. But it was just a few moments before I passed out, really, and I don't actually need full eyesight for most of what I do nowadays.*

*Turns out when you're not on the battlefield or in the wilderness, and everything you do revolves around bureaucracy in some way, squinting and glasses work well enough. I actually have assistants that read me things that I can't see clearly, and help me with other things like walking properly.*

*It's manageable, I guess. My throat still works, which is the important bit. You don't need to worry that much, Tommy.*

*I write these words as I have guards standing nearby in case of assassination attempts, hah. I've survived two - only two, surprisingly enough. Neither of which were from Dream.*

*It pains me that some of my own people hate me and my policies enough to want me dead and be willing to do it. But it's impossible to please everyone - I tried in the first few days. That mindset got thrown out really quick.*

*Anyway, enough about my troubles. The first letter I send you after everything, and I spent so long rambling about just me? What a terrible friend I am.*

*Rest assured that we are still friends. When you said I've changed, Tommy you said right. But I hope, like you, that we are still friends. And that means we are, right?*

*Anyway, how are you doing, Tommy? Something more specific besides just "it's going great", please. What's the place you're living in like? How do you pass the time? How enjoyable is it? What about your family?*

*Give me details. Maybe daydreaming about being there in Sanctuary with you will be a better escape than the alcohol. You would want that, wouldn't you?*

*You said you want to come back and visit some day. I would love that so, so much, Tommy, but try to keep that in the future. Future future, or something. Dream was really, really, um. I'm not sure how to put this. He was unhinged? About you leaving again and having no idea where you went. No idea what that's about - you'd understand if you'd been there.*

*Let's just say he wasn't happy about it at all. Wait until the situation with the Dream Kingdom calms down and L'Manberg is more secure, okay? Or at least as secure as it can be. If we don't get invaded and overrun, that is.*

*Tommy, I hope you're happy with your family, and your life. And you shouldn't feel bad about not staying with me. You really deserve peace. Live the good life for the both of us, okay?*

*Miss you too,*

*Tubbo.*

*P.S. Ranboo is fucking amazing. He's 11/10, I will reach over the ocean and punt you if you say otherwise again.*

## Chapter End Notes

aka the chapter where I give Wilbur a panic attack

if its any consolation it was a fucking pain to write. if you enjoyed that comment box is always there!

also yeah sorry about the super long wait this chapter was just much harder than i expected and the next chapter doesn't look easier because half the things that were supposed to happen this chapter got relegated to next chapter lol

on the other hand... remember the whole tommy and dream thing? see how this fic is now in a series? origin fic for it comes out tomorrow :D

also, Whitelisted is one of Techno's alt account names. It's the most well known one, anyway, and featured heavily in his Potato War series (also where the potato obsession comes from).

i reply to comments lives! [twitch](#)

[tumblr](#) and [twitter](#) for questions and art!

# over the palisade morning will break

## Chapter Notes

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See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“You’ve read Tubbo’s letter, right?”

“Yep,” Tommy says. He brushes down the wheat seeds on his palm and a chicken eagerly plucks them from their fall.

It’s one of the smaller white ones - the one that Phil jokes always has a vaguely apologetic look in her eyes as she warbles around pecking for bits of food.

Doesn’t stop her from stealing worms right beneath her coopmates’ beaks, though. Tommy had scrawled “Mack” on her nametag after a brief period of deliberation wherein Techno made an offhand comment about how many creatures Tommy has named “Clara” in his life.

Wilbur had then promptly named one of the chickens speckled with spots of gray “Soot” and dared anyone to change it.

“What do you think?” Ranboo asks, now fluffing up Soot’s feathers.

“About... Tubbo writing back?” Tommy asks. He swallows down a coil of something lumpy in his throat.

“I guess? Mostly just... I mean, he’s changed, yeah? I’ve known him for six months and he changed so much in that time. Wouldn’t you...”

Ranboo falls silent. Then he gives Soot a pat on the head, and nudges her back towards her brethren.

“Nevermind,” he finally says. “I didn’t mean to pry.”

“No, it’s fine,” Tommy says. “I - Tubbo’s really different, yeah, but I expected it and all.”

“But he’s not different in a - a *good* way, is he?” Ranboo asks. “Not like you are.”

Tommy extends a grain-filled hand to another chicken - one on whose name tag Phil had simply scrawled “Rhyley” on, chuckling that someone had to give at least one of them a completely normal, no-strings-attached name.

A hard beak nibbles, bordering painful. But he doesn’t draw his hand away.

“That depends on how you look at it,” he finally says. “Someone has to run L’Manberg - or New L’Manberg, I suppose. Guess.”

He purses his lips.

“No one *has* to run a country,” Ranboo frowns. “No one - no one should be pressured to do anything.”

The words hang, not really an accusation, but sprawled with a dull sort of resignation that makes Tommy’s curling fingers almost brush Rhyley’s head. She clucks a warning, but continues to peck away at the seeds.

“Like I said,” Tommy swallows again. “Tubbo changed to run that fucking country better. Plenty of people will thank him for it later.”

*If he makes it to that “later”.*

“You don’t seem to like New L’Manberg that much.”

Tommy scowls. Again. The twisting pricks of his palm are getting harsher.

“Starting L’Manberg began Wilbur’s - well, you see the state he’s in right now. It was a *lot* fucking worse in Pogtopia and when we first came here. If I could choose to make it never happen I would.”

This is territory dark and unfettered in their truths. Tommy tries to hold himself. Back.

*Everything is fine.*

He flings the remaining seeds. They arc the air like tiny slingshot pebbles and the five chickens begin clamoring after them in balls of shuffling feathers.

“Not even for L’Manberg’s people?” Ranboo asks.

Tommy exhales, soft and smoothing. Ruffles up his own hair in an attempt to scratch the itch hiding beneath.

“Ranboo, even though I’m one of L’Manberg’s founding fathers, I’m avoiding all of its problems to lounge with my family an entire continent away. My family whom, let me remind you, includes the two terrorists who unleashed fucking withers and bombs that completely desolated the capital city and led to thousands of casualties. Whose side do you think I’m taking here?”

“I - point taken,” Ranboo coughs out after a moment. He glances down again, and Tommy with him, to green grass and flowers white and yellow, the chickens clucking around the unsheared fields encircled by cliffs and canals.

“But are you happy with that decision?”

Tommy stills, even more than he did before.

*It’s fine, it’s fine. We’re fine. Everything’s - well, Tubbo’s not fine and that means you’re not-*

He takes a deep breath.

“What?”

“Are you happy? That you choose your - your family over Tubbo and New L’Manberg?” Ranboo’s gaze wanders behind Tommy - to his cloak, Tommy realizes, soft blues fluttering softly in the wind. It’s become such routine to sling it over himself every morning he so often forgets it’s even there now.

“Of course,” Tommy says. There is no hesitation.

Ranboo nods, motions small.

“I just-” Tommy bites his lip for a moment, and continues. “I just wish it didn’t have to come down to them or Tubbo. But I have no doubt they’re so much more important to me than L’Manberg will ever fucking be. If that makes me selfish then - then I guess I am.”

“I don’t think you’re more selfish than most other people,” Ranboo says. “But I do think people are - well. Naturally selfish. Tubbo is the extremely rare exception.”

“He is,” Tommy breathes. “Fucker really gotta outshow the rest of us in everything, huh?”

“Yeah.” There’s a brush of pain in the concurrence, like the sear of fireworks grazing by. Neither comment on it.

Instead they watch the chickens laze around some more, both settling onto the cool grass still laden with morning dew.

A distant bark sounds from the house. One of Clementine’s excited ones. Tommy wonders what they’re doing.

He’s contemplating getting up to check when Ranboo finally speaks again.

“Would you say they’re good brothers?”

Tommy opens his mouth, and closes it again.

“Good brothers?” he repeats, like the words are foreign imports he’s only just learned. They settle strangely on his tongue.

“Yeah. Like - I mean, I think Wilbur leading you into a war was really - like, a really not good decision. But there’s always so much more behind the scenes, you know? I’ve learned that a lot over the past few months. Plus, you two seem to really care about each other.”

“It’s ‘cause we do,” Tommy says. He looks down at his palms, scarred from a dozen nicks and cuts. “I was willing to follow him into war for a reason, Ranboo. He’s my brother and he - he was a damn good one before L’Manberg. He cared for me, taught me shit, protected me - and Techno did too. They did all that when they didn’t have to. So did Phil. I can’t just - pretend none of that happened, you know?”

“Oh.” Ranboo plucks a pale yellow dandelion from the grass and begins wringing the stem. “I never really had a family, but... yeah. I guess I can see why you’d choose to come with them. It’s just - well.”

“Yeah?”

Ranboo gives his own exhale, plucking another dandelion.

“I was in New L’Manberg for months. Helping Tubbo run things, you know? And, like - both Techno and Wilbur are really, really hated by pretty much everyone except Tubbo and Fundy, and even they don’t like them either.”

Tommy shifts his gaze to the tangle of flowers in Ranboo's hands. Somewhere along the way wavy rhododendrons have joined.

"Well, I sort of expected that," he said. "Tubbo said as much in his letter."

Techno's rockets had blinded Tubbo in one eye and left the other one damaged to the point where Tubbo had often needed assistance navigating Pogtopia. It left one of his legs permanently crippled too - not unlike Wilbur right now, in fact.

Tommy had been so, so angry afterwards. But currenting through the anger had also been a confusion deep as ocean trenches, because - *why? Why would Techno do this?*

He knows Techno's weakness to pressure. Of course he does. But he also knows with a bone-deep certainty that if it had been him or Wilbur in that box, Techno would have ripped out his sword and cleaved it clean through Schlatt's skull instead.

So why couldn't he have done the same for Tubbo?

Somewhere along the way, through the mountains and valleys and late night reassurances, Tommy thinks he might have found the threads of an answer.

"You're willing to... accept both? Facts? That Wilbur and Techno are your brothers that you're willing to - um. Sacrifice so much for? But also that Tubbo's the way he is right now because of them?" Ranboo stops for a breath, words coming faster. "That thousands of New L'Manberg citizens died, many more injured and their homes destroyed, because of their actions?"

"Tubbo made his own decision to stay President."

"You know that's not what I mean," Ranboo says. He pauses, and his voice lowers like a drawbridge. "I know it's - hard. But I also learned this working in New L'Manberg's cabinet - pretending things are fine will only make it worse in the long run."

Tommy turns away, frown tugging, and thinks of broken pedestals. They're still broken - but people are never statues on pedestals to begin with, are they?

Statues are still and lifeless and unchanging, and people are anything but.

"You know," Ranboo continues when Tommy remains silent. "I used to look up to Technoblade. Pretty much all the leaderboard champions do in Hypixel. And even when I saw Tubbo for the first time, at our wedding..."

He trails off, fingers twisting further around the flowers.

"Even then, when all the suits and finery in the world couldn't hide his half-melted eye and burn scars, I still looked up to him. I found a way to justify it in my head by just... not thinking further about it."

Tommy stays silent. He knows where this is going.

*It's fine - not fine. It's not really that fine.*

"But when I saw the city of L'Manberg for the first time, the place I thought would be my new home for the rest of my life," Ranboo continues, eyes closing. "All that respect was lost. Because - all the

desolation, Tommy. They call it a desolation for a *reason* . Every part of the city wears the weight of those explosions. And the death count still grows higher every day as more rubble is exposed..."

"I know," Tommy says quietly. "You don't need to lecture me on this, Ranboo. You saw the aftermath of November 16th, a few months later. But I was *there*. I lived through it. I saw wither skulls explode entire bodies into wet splatters. After the explosion, for days, the only thing we could see through the thick ash was fire, and more fire. I helped clear out and identify bodies."

"I - oh. Right." Ranboo lets the flower crown, half finished and uncurling, fall apart onto the grass. Two of the chickens, closer than the rest, shift over to poke at it curiously. They're the remaining unnamed ones.

"Yeah." Tommy tilts his head, ever so slightly. Clementine's barking grows in volume, somewhere along the distance. "Do you hate them for it?"

"Hate is a strong word," Ranboo says. Hesitation seems to rest heavy on his shoulders. "I - I wish they didn't do any of that, you know? Of course I wish for it. And I think they're lesser for what they've done, but - I mean. I don't really hate them, not like New L'Manberg does. I guess I'm not as invested, since I've only lived in the country for a few months."

"And Tubbo doesn't hate them."

"No," Ranboo sighs. "He - well, he knew Wilbur, fought with him, so I guess that checks out. And I think you're the reason he doesn't resent Techno as much as he probably should, or something like that. I don't know the details though."

Tommy remains silent, once again.

Techno stated his intentions for L'Manberg so many times in Pogtopia - and while they weren't the full story with him, they were *part* of the story still. Tubbo understood that better than Tommy had at the time.

He had forgiven Techno for the festival so quickly too.

Clucks drag Tommy out of that thought and he gladly takes the wheel back to the "everything is fine" reality. The two chickens have moved past the flower crown to Ranboo's hands, nipping at his fingers with no regard.

"You should name them," Tommy says.

"Don't you want to?"

He shrugs. "I already named Mack, and Techno didn't seem interested. So you can do it and my family will just suck it up."

"Oh. Okay."

Ranboo grasps the blank name tag fitting around one of the chickens, surface clay-like and and still soft. After a moment, *Joy* is scraped into it. Tommy reminds himself to bring out some ink and fill in the space later.

"We can never have too much of it," Ranboo says. "Might as well."

Joy making a high squeaking noise, as if agreeing.

After a pause, he takes the other chicken's name tag and scratches on *Crickett*.

"You misspelled that," Tommy says.

Ranboo blinks.

"Oh, um - I have a cat whose name contains 7 Js back in New L'Manberg. I sort of have a history with adding extra letters onto pet names."

"Fucking weird, but okay."

Right. Attachments back in New L'Manberg.

It all circles back eventually, to uncut relations.

"Do you know Tubbo has a drinking problem?" Tommy finds himself asking.

"O - oh. That. Yeah, it's - I mean, he rarely gets completely wasted."

"And Niki of all people lets him just do it?" Tommy asks, struggling to keep his voice from rising.

He had searched for an escape and found another maze instead. Great.

"Tubbo's - it's not a great situation," Ranboo admits. "But he's under so much stress, even she feels he should unwind once in a while. Though I think he drinks more than she realizes."

He looks down again. "Me escaping here doesn't really help things, does it?"

"No," Tommy says. But he lets the accusation die on his tongue.

Ranboo hadn't deserved being forced into a marriage and he hadn't deserved being forced to help revive L'Manberg's corpse. It isn't fair to pin any blame on him.

Tubbo doesn't deserve any of this either. And yet Tommy is an ocean away, family with two people who helped create the nightmare he is drinking his way through.

"I'm sorry," Tommy says, and wishes that he sounds both more and less like Wilbur when the words drift back to his ears.

"I'm sorry too," Ranboo murmurs. Crickett squirms out of his hands and flaps away in another cloud of feathers. Joy rushes to join her.

They're not perfect. They're not even great, really but - well, they're all flying towards their own unreachable resolutions.

Tommy rises up, pants damp but cloak still soft as summer silk. He begins picking his way back towards the house. Ranboo follows shortly after, leaving behind his crown of flowers that never were.

Maybe they will be one day, though.

~\*~

*President Tubbo Underscore*

*White House Capital Building, New L'Manberg*



*THIS LETTER IS OFFICIAL CORRESPONDENCE. OPENING, REDIRECTING, OR OTHERWISE TAMPERING WITH THIS LETTER, IF NOT BY THE ADDRESSEE, IS A CAPITAL FELONY*

*Hey Tubbo,*

*I hope you're fine, but I know you're really not.*

*New L'Manberg (and fuck does that feel weird to write, but I guess it really is New L'Manberg now, huh?) means a lot to you. I get that too. I think for now we'll both just have to wallow in the acceptance of where that'll lead us.*

*But enough. It's been only two letters and I feel like we've already exhausted that topic so much, even if I know realistically there's a lot more to go through. Unlike me with my home, I doubt you want to explain New L'Manberg's 7th edition revised tax code or something equally ridiculous for the 42th time, and you know I have little patience for that anyway.*

*I ~~feel the need~~ should remind you to be careful of the Captain's men, though. Captain Sparklez managed to bring his kingdom to the powerhouse it is for a reason, and part of that reason involves annexing other nations.*

*I hope you have safeguards up your sleeve. Knowing you, you probably do, but you can never be too careful. Ironically Dream taught us that.*

*Also, since Dream is apparently exceptionally mad about me specifically disappearing for some reason, even though Wilbur and Techno are way more important, please keep me updated on that fucker's movements. You probably don't have much to go on but that's fine. Hope you kick his ass soon.*

*One last bit from you - how's Fundy doing? I feel like he's passed beneath our (you decide what our refers to) radars for too long. He's not holding up amazing, of course, but specifics? He is... well, technically no longer my nephew, weird as that was to begin with. But Wilbur's too fucking scared to ask, so I'm doing it for him.*

*Now. You asked about how I am doing.*

*When I think about your situation I find I have no room for complaint. Everything should be all fine and dandy. Wilbur's getting better, Techno's committing words instead of violence, Phil is even more of a mother hen than he was before me and Wilbur left but he means well and I can tell his past mistakes haunt him every night.*

*So yeah, all in all we love each other and talk out issues and and yadda yadda, it's all sappy and stuff and shit. Great. We built a nice house and have a pet dog and everything. What's not to love?*

*Everything should be fine, you know?*

*I had a talk with Ranboo the other day. Everything should be fine, but sometimes I just... don't. Don't feel fine.*

*I don't even know why. It's really dumb, Tubbo. Like we'll be talking or joking or doing some shit and I'll feel fine and happy one moment and not the other. It's not, like - Wilbur levels of depression or anything. Nothing like that. Just the weird sense that things aren't well. Or something.*

*It does happen a lot more often when the topic of L'Manberg or - actually, anything to do with L'Manberg or Dream or just the whole war business in general. And I must confess that includes you too.*

*Am I going crazy, Tubbo? Am I a bad friend? (Actually, I know the answer to that one and it's yes.) Am I being ungrateful that things can't be better? Can't be perfect? Obviously things will never be perfect, but I - don't know.*

*I have no answers, Tubbo. A shocking admission from me, I know, but it's the truth and the truth is something I find increasingly little space to hide from.*

*Soon I will need to march out and face it. I'm mentally preparing myself. Please send your spiritual support across the ocean.*

*~~But~~*

*~~I hope~~*

*Anyway, you asked for specifics about my new home! Which is really my family but like, the place is really cool too. Sanctuary's a whole other story Ranboo's probably gushing to you about, but I think we're better. We have a fish pond.*

*That's right, a whole fish pond. Aren't we awesome? We named the fish too, even if we kill some for dinner once in a while. They've learned to...*

*Miss you more,*

*Tommy*

*P.S. Ranboo is a wimp, but I guess he's got his good bits. I'll compromise with a 9.5/10, how's that?*

## Chapter End Notes

100k words finally pog only took 6 months lol

for those of you wondering why Tommy's writing style seems to contrast with his speaking style so much - Techno and Wilbur were the ones who "taught" him "how letters should be written".

also hnnn oboe auditions are trying to kill me and finals are coming up again nooooo cant wait until school ends lmao

i reply to comments lives! [twitch](#)

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# 'cause im built by, you

## Chapter Notes

A Tommy origins prequel for this fic's universe is now in progress. Read it [here](#).

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“So are you’re all brothers?”

The question catches Techno in the middle of a landing. He twists sideways to hook around an iron bar nearby, moments before his feet slip to dangle above a patch of spider lilies.

Pearl watches from below, smile faintly twitching as Techno pulls himself back onto a stable platform.

“It’s the middle of the night,” he grouses in her direction. The darkness of the new moon would almost completely obscure him from her sight, but Techno himself, with his piglin traits, can make out the clipboard in her hands just fine.

“That means no one’s around to hear, so you can talk more freely.” A quill flicks to join, laden with enough ink he can also make out their tiny glistenings against the ghost-white shaft.

“Might you have considered I came out to practice at this time specifically so I *wouldn’t* have to talk to people?”

“I have considered that possibility, yes,” Pearl says. “And I have elected to ignore it.”

Techno gives her another withering glare, but receives a mere shrug in return.

“So what do you want?” he finally asks after a moment of internal debate about whether jumping off the platform and running for the mountains would be a good idea.

“Well, *are* all of you brothers? Or family? Really close friends?”

They never did disclose any details, Techno realizes. It’s hardly like any of them acts as if Phil is their father in public. The world connects Technoblade and Philza together only as former co-rulers of the Antarctic Empire, and not at all to L’Manberg’s founding fathers thousands of miles north.

Well, Techno supposes his name being branded as a terrorist in L’Manberg does serve *some* connection, but nothing on the personal level Pearl, Scott, and the rest of this town’s leadership must observe. He hadn’t considered how baffling it might seem.

“Does it really matter?” he asks back.

His heart seems to give an erratic twitch, echoing his own words back at him.

*Does it really matter?*

At least Pearl seems to know she's stuck in a loop here. There's no justifiable excuse for the town's wellbeing she could give for Techno's answer.

It's a matter of curiosity and not much more, then.

"Well, you certainly have my interest peaked," Pearl says just a moment later. "I can't make you answer, of course, but you can rest easy in the knowledge that if I spill anything I shouldn't, you can always hunt me down and stab me or something."

"That wouldn't undo any of the damage you've done," Techno frowns. A sigh, low and quiet, escapes his lips.

Pearl tilts her head, eyes gleaming.

Great. He's somehow spun *more* attention.

"That's an unusual perspective to take," she says.

"Is it wrong?" Techno asks. He can't help his eyebrow raise, though there's no way she's seeing it. "I mean, there's plenty of abstract things to debate the validity of, but that's not one of them."

"Vengeance is often justice sought," Pearl says.

"And when overlapped innocents bend towards death," Techno finishes the quote. He doesn't quite remember where it came from.

"That's why you have a legal system," he continues, turning his head. "So people don't duel each other to death on the streets for the presumed lost honor of their great grand-uncle's stolen turkey or something, right?"

"Well - yes," Pearl says. "You know, this is a pretty favorable perspective for you to take, given the whole war criminal situation."

Techno actually snorts, at that.

"If I were tried in a fair court my destination would still be the noose," he says. "But of course, they can't exactly drag me back to be tried."

Not L'Manberg, not any of the other nations whose generals, soldiers, occasional king or prince he's stabbed and left to bleed out on either muddied ditches or gold-gilded altars.

"If they caught Wilbur Soot alone, though," Pearl says. "I imagine he would have some trouble."

"That's why I'm here," Techno finds his frown back again.

"Ah, yes. How much of a connection do you two hold again? Or with Tommy Innit, for that matter, since the Dream Kingdom is hunting him down? See, brothers is the explanation that seems to hold the most water to me, but I can't express confidence in anything."

Techno takes a moment to appreciate how Pearl's somehow beaten him at his own game and guided his escaping threads of conversation right back to where they've started.

Then he swings himself off the platform, deftly steps around the patches of azalea that dot the garden's entrance, and begins his footrace back to the mountains.

~\*~

“So. You and Technoblade more than just friends?”

“Don’t make it sound so weird,” Wilbur says. “We’re-”

He pauses.

“We’re brothers.”

Why does he hesitate at that line?

Hbomb shifts in his couch, searching for the kind of comfortableness people always want before difficult conversations but will never find. Wilbur is his still, broken mirror across the table.

“Brothers - and that means Tommy is Technoblade’s brother too?”

“Yeah,” Wilbur says. The words come easier this time, but not the thought itself. If anything it seems to snag even more heavily. “And Phil’s our dad. I know, I actually have a father. Truly shocking.”

“Kinda of a shit dad to have let things get so far,” Hbomb says. A dare edges the words, but Wilbur waves them off with a shrug.

“We all made our own mistakes,” he says. “Don’t presume to know the story when you don’t, Hbomb.”

He is the one with the dare now - Hbomb’s accusation, though true, sets a pool of lava smoldering inside of himself. A weight unforgiving.

Because it’s true, but it says *so little* of what really matters, in the end. Where are the late night embraces and morning hair ruffles, whispered assurances and drawn, off-key paces towards a resolution inconceivable?

Wilbur touches his fingers against his shirt, thin linen yellow and one of many results of Phil’s rediscovered hobby of sewing. There’s a small black poppy embroidered over where his heart lays steadily beating.

Unsettling, perhaps. But Phil’s reputation as the Angel of Death is not entirely spun of only myth and rumor. Where Wilbur once might have curled at the idea in crying, storm-tossed indecision, nowadays it feels more like a gentle guard than anything else.

“Presumption? In the presence of the great Wilbur Soot?” Hbomb is clearly teasing. But somehow the mockery is less than what Wilbur expects.

“Ask away, then,” Wilbur says. “I know you want to.”

He very deliberately does not shift in his position.

“Well, I guess - okay. Why did you blow up L’Manberg?”

Wilbur stares, and feels nothing in his chest but an aching regret, and that familiar choking hollowness that sometimes still chases his dreams.

And he hears Tommy’s voice. Tommy’s, always Tommy’s.

Nothing hurts, though. *That much*, at least. A little pain is practically nothing at all. Even a little more than that, or a little more...

It's not the cliffs. It's not the cliffs.

He'll be fine.

He wants Phil's hands combing his hair again. That always feels so nice.

"It wasn't mine anymore," Wilbur says. "But I wasn't ready to let go of it. So I wanted it to die with me."

Hbomb takes a few moments to process the answer.

"But-

He falls silent when Wilbur raises a hand.

"I know that doesn't make any sense," he says. "That's because there is no sense to it, unless you want the whole explanation of how I slowly went insane over the course of the revolution and exile. The point is, my motivations didn't have any reason to them and trying to provide any is a waste of time."

"I - I see," Hbomb says. He's stopped fidgeting.

Then he continues.

"But you seem..."

"Less likely to accuse everyone of being traitors while scheming about how to blow up their nation behind their backs?" Wilbur asks.

"That works," Hbomb says slowly, blinking. "I mean, you clearly care about however your family's doing. If I had to guess, it's the only thing you care about."

Something cold slithers in Wilbur's chest.

"What else is there?"

"Well, aside from how the Wilbur Soot I knew would never have been content with just passing through life in anonymity like this..." Hbomb sips at his cup of tea, though Wilbur can clearly see he doesn't actually drink anything. "It was - I see you with Tommy all the time and it's so different from what I'm used to."

Wilbur gives no response. He has no illusions to himself - it's because he doesn't have one.

"In a good way though! Like it was clear back then you cared about Tommy a great deal, but it wasn't always - great. Here you two seem to have gotten some, uh, miscommunication issues sorted out."

"Miscommunication is one way to say it," Wilbur mutters.

Miscommunication. Hm.

Hbomb still presumes many things, some of which rightfully so.

“Anyway, I guess I should cheer you on a bit, even if you’re a - well.”

“You can say I’m a terrorist,” Wilbur says. “And murderer. Propagandist. War criminal. Child abuser, too, and towards my own brother. I’m not denying any of those things.”

And yet, has he ever said them on his tongue with such surety before? Why now to Hbomb of all people?

Why not Tommy? Truly?

He knows. They both shy away so easily, and Techno as well.

“Well, yeah.” Hbomb coughs. “I’m not in unique company, though, so I won’t judge too harshly.”

Wilbur wonders what it says about their world, that it breeds such unfairness so casually.

“Anyway, what I mean to say is that I think you’re doing better for your family than you think. You clearly care, and maybe my outsider eyes don’t understand anything but I think that even if you’re not a paragon of redemption for L’Manberg or the world, you’re making an effort towards where it counts to you and your family.”

“We’ve never cared much about spreading goodness around the world, no,” Wilbur murmurs. They’re not that type of people. Phil adopted Tommy while drafting plans for a military empire, for fucking gods’ sake.

And then he wonders what it says about them, that they’ve found themselves together again, even after everything.

An effort towards where it counts, hm?

Something cold touches his hip. Wilbur looks down and wonders when he’s shifted over far enough to touch a table leg.

~\*~

It comes in the forest, deep summer green and dense as the valleys. In the sways of crossbows aiming, long pink braid flicking to the sky in a rainbow arc of fluttering flowers, woven with long-lost patterns.

“You’d think all the wildlife would know to keep the fuck away from here by now.” Tommy nudges the leg of the goat Techno just shot down, blood seeping like a march across its fur.

“There’s danger everywhere, Tommy,” Wilbur says. He glances at the goat, and then back to him. “Sometimes you just have to be alert and live with it.”

“Well, duh,” Tommy says. “Big, lumbering pig with pointy sticks seems like a no-go, though.”

“Big, lumbering pig?” Techno asks. “Glad to know that’s what you think of me. My feelings, Tommy. They are so hurt.”

Tommy laughs. So does Techno, small and short, but it’s strangely wavery.

Oh.



“You know I don’t really mean that, right?” he checks. It feels strange saying something so obvious, as it always does, but Tommy isn’t risking it now. Not after he’s lost so much to not paying attention.

Techno hesitates just a moment too long before saying, lips biting, “yes.”

Oh. Fuck.

“Techno,” Wilbur says, frowning. He leans forward on his cane, newly polished and presented by Phil just yesterday. “Techno, what’s - what’s wrong?”

He seems to catch in the web of that question himself, eyes jerking back down.

*It’s not too late*, Tommy thinks. They can still back out, crack a joke and saunter on. The goat’s sightless eyes stare into them, like a judge daring a defendant to challenge the sentence.

Techno heaves a breath, sound almost stuttery.

So none of them think they should back out.

“It’s just - you know, you’ve been writing letters with Tubbo,” Techno says.

Tommy bites his lips. “Yeah.”

They’ve both picked up on it. Techno can’t still be upset about the government thing. Surely not. But there’s more than one reason to be nervous about Tubbo for him.

“Is he-” Techno takes a deep breath. Is that the first one, or the second? Tommy’s not sure. “Is he upset about you being here with me? Since I...”

“Since you shot those fireworks at him?” Tommy asks.

“Since - yeah. And since I summoned two withers in his country.”

Wilbur looks back at them. Takes a step closer.

“It’s not Tubbo’s country,” Tommy corrects. “You can’t own a country.”

Techno takes his gaze to the side, to Wilbur. A glance is shared - an affirmation of *something*.

“What is it?” Tommy asks.

“We - we had a whole talk about it,” Wilbur says. He raises a hand to his hair, combs a few fingers through it. “About how I didn’t have the right to dictate how an entire country should be run.”

“No one person does,” Techno says, distress pooling in his voice, and Tommy thinks faintly *wow, isn’t that just a thing to hear?* “I - sorry. I’m sorry, referring to Tubbo like that was a mistake.”

“Oh,” Tommy says. He swallows. “That’s okay.”

The words are warm in his throat.

*It’s not too late now*, his mind whispers.

He stays silent.

“So... Tubbo?” Wilbur finally asks.

“Um...” Tommy takes his own breath. “He says he’s not mad at you, Techno. I mean - you know, New L’Manberg wants your head on a pike, but not Tubbo. He just says he’s beyond caring. Got other shit to worry about, can’t be bothered to get worked up over it now that you’re not a problem anymore.”

Techno nods, slow and ever so slightly more erratic than what Tommy is used to seeing. He opens his mouth, and then closes it, and then opens it again, a cheek turning up in nervous question.

Fucking Technoblade, nervous. People would pay to see this shit.

“Just say it, Techno,” Wilbur whispers not-so-subtly.

Tommy manages to stifle his chuckle. Techno clears his throat.

“Are you over it?” he finally says, words all stilted like he’s translating them from a foreign language. “About - what I did? To Tubbo and L’Manberg? And the whole pit thing afterwards. I mean, like - it’s okay if - I don’t think you are but...”

Tommy looks down at the blood soaked-goat, and then at Wilbur, hands twitching on his cane, and them back on Techno again.

The forest hums and rattles its own ambiance like encouragement. An eagle screeches far above.

It’s the female of the mated pair, returning from a hunt. Tommy has memorized their schedule.

They need names, he thinks. Names. He’s glimpsed the tiny chicks, fluffed in down and sprouting fledgling feathers still. There’s more than one chick, a rarity among eagles.

She always seems so fierce, protective when she returns to the nest with kills dangling. Beak sharp enough to tear flesh like paper, but all the same she combs her chicks’ feathers with it in gentle, curving motions.

Rou, maybe. She seems like a Rou. Or Rouza - wouldn’t Rouza be a nice name for her? He hasn’t got the faintest clue for her partner, though. Not like he’s got much of a reference for that.

“Tommy?” Techno asks.

And oh, there’s fear seeping into the name now, like blood seeps down the goat’s fur. Tommy wonders how many people in all the dimensions have heard Techno truly afraid.

“I - I care more than Tubbo does,” he says finally. “But that seems to be the way of things around here, if you catch my drift. I don’t think about the pit fight all that much anymore, really, but everything else...”

“I thought so,” Techno says. He sounds resigned. “I - nevermind.”

They’ve left it for so long. Has it gotten better, like a wound scabbing on its own, ugly and messy and flaking its brittle bits but healing nonetheless? Or has it only rotted further, infection set with that disgusting pus of yellow and green and black Tommy is all too familiar with?

“Tommy’s been mad at me for a lot of things too,” Wilbur says. He nudges Techno.

“Well, no shit,” Tommy says. “But you’re - that was what you did to me.”

He pauses.

“Somehow when it’s about Tubbo it’s harder,” he adds quietly. “I can look past the whole pit thing - well, I guess not look past it. But I had a harder time with Wilbur than I did with you in Pogtopia, really, and yet we’re still here. Point is, Tubbo keeps me more fucking... angry, I guess.”

And isn’t that a strange thought? Still being angry at them, but the fire’s dulled and content to be pushed aside. Tommy wonders why they’re bothering to drag it out again.

“You’ve always been like that,” Techno says. “Caring more about when others have been hurt, than yourself.”

“Looks like we’ve all gotta work on this whole self-care thing, huh?” Tommy cracks a smile. “Watch out, Wilbur. You got competition.”

“Let’s not get too carried away with it though,” Wilbur says, though he laughs a little and so does Techno.

“Of course not,” Tommy says. He takes a step closer, until he’s less than arm’s length away from either of them. “It’s harder. Neither of you can help Tubbo here, you know? I can’t. And he’s dealing with all this presidency shit too.”

“Too caring for his own good,” Wilbur agrees. “He’s the ‘greater good’ type of guy. Though...”

But his eyes glaze again, for just a moment.

“I think we’ve all gone through that,” Tommy says softly. “That revolution destroyed you, Wilbur. I - the thought of Tubbo going through all that again...”

“And we can’t make amends or anything,” Techno says. “With the distance, and with...”

“Yeah, not much point in that,” Tommy mutters. “You can’t get his sight back or cure all his stress. Not like you would care enough, since Tubbo’s not family anyway.”

“He-” Techno’s hands are at his side, limp. Unnaturally so. “I’m sorry for what I did, Tommy. I wasn’t thinking straight back then either and I would take it back if I could. I’d apologize to Tubbo if I could.”

Tommy opens his mouth, but Techno continues on.

“I think I said a while back, when we were first getting here - I think I either said or thought that I didn’t regret the withers. Now I do. Yes, I don’t consider Tubbo family, but I know how much he means to you. And - well, that New L’Manberg hasn’t been reabsorbed into the Dream SMP yet... he’s earned my respect.”

“We all underestimated Tubbo, I think,” Wilbur adds. “I had named you leader because I knew you’d give it to Tubbo, and I thought L’Manberg’s remains would just completely crumble under a child. Especially one like him.”

Tommy gives them a smile, small and strained but somehow still real through it all.

“Tubbo’s awesome. I wouldn’t be friends with him if he wasn’t,” he says. “World just wasn’t fucking ready for him.”

“No, it wasn’t,” Techno agrees. He looks away. “For what it’s worth, I wish he didn’t have to prove everyone wrong like this. I was against you guys reforming the government specifically because I feared you would be caught in his position, Tommy.”

“And you thought two withers were the best way to stop it? You thought - you thought beating me up in a pit...”

“The pit was messed up on every level and I was... I wanted to prove myself in the right,” Techno exhales. “I only thought about violence as the solution back then. Hypocritical, I know, given everything I had written, but... well. It doesn’t excuse anything. I made sure not to injure you too hard, but completely disregarded consideration for your mental wellbeing.”

Wilbur lowers his head.

“Yeah,” Tommy mutters, chest heavy. “But at least - well, both of you are making up on that front. That counts for something. To me.”

He sighs.

“Like I said - and I don’t know if this is bad. But it’s what else you did that really...”

“I regret the withers as far as the damage it’s done to Tubbo and you,” Techno says. “I’m not really... well, I was known as a war criminal even before I got to Pogtopia. Not really the selfless, stranger-caring kind of person.”

“I know,” Tommy says. “To be fair, I don’t think I am either. But Tubbo is and those withers created a mess for him.”

“I’m sorry,” Techno repeats, yet again.

“Me too,” Wilbur says. “About the explosions. And also what I put Tubbo through in Pogtopia.”

“And having him be a spy in general?”

He winces. “Yeah, that. That was... that was a really bad move, wasn’t it?”

Tommy closes his eyes.

“I think he would have done it anyway. He cares too much. But you created L’Manberg and that whole mess, so...”

He shrugs his hands out in a vague sprawl even he doesn’t know the meaning of. There’s so much blame, so much regret, and yet he still stands with wrappings of hugs and apologies.

“You’re not forgiving us,” Techno suddenly says. “I - I know that, and I don’t think you should anyways. But, uh - well. You’re here with us.”

“Well, it was us or sticking around in New L’Manberg,” Wilbur says.

“I wanted to stay with Tubbo, actually,” Tommy whispers. He takes another step, until he’s almost brushing against Wilbur’s side. “But Tubbo told me to come with you guys. He knew - he knew what

New L'Manberg would do to him and he didn't want me to have any part of it, I think. And he said you all needed me more."

"Oh," Techno says softly. Almost... no, *definitely* guiltily.

"I don't regret it though," Tommy hastily adds. "I - Tubbo would be even more upset and stressed if I were there, 'specially since I'm not good at any of that government shit."

"You would have adapted," Wilbur says softly, the words brushing his ear. "You're strong like that. But it would have been the most miserable years of your life."

"Assuming Dream wouldn't have dragged you off to somewhere," Techno says. "Surprisingly likely possibility."

"I know," Tommy says. He takes another deep breath. "Anyway, I - shit. It's all weird, thinking about this."

"We made it through me throwing myself off a cliff," Wilbur says, mouth twitching. Something glistens in his eyes. "I think we'll make it through this."

"That was a terrible night," Tommy mutters. "Please never do that again."

"I won't. Promise."

Dangerous things, broken promises. And yet Tommy clings to it so tightly he fears it might shatter beneath his grasp.

"For yourself, too," he manages. "Not just to see us happy or whatever. Get more hobbies or something, I don't know."

"I could teach you knitting," Techno drawls. "Or better yet, get Phil to teach you."

Wilbur laughs.

"It's really that obvious, huh?" he asks.

"Kinda," Tommy says.

"Not really," Techno says at the same time.

They glance at each other.

Techno doesn't understand half the shit Tommy does about cues, and Tommy barely knows anything either despite being Wilbur's brother. Or perhaps because he's Wilbur's brother.

"You two know me so well," Wilbur sighs. He shifts - and Tommy finally takes this as the moment to wrap arms beneath his shoulders and squeeze tight.

Wilbur stiffens, and then relaxes, quicker than Tommy remembers he used to.

"Fucking do, huh? Better stay that way," he adds, briefly burying his face in Wilbur's chest again.

"Okay."

“So you-” Techno hovers at the edge, and Tommy might be mistaken but he thinks he looks faintly envious. “I mean, I don’t want problems from the whole... what I did to Tubbo thing. Or you, or L’Manberg. Well, not problems, but... you know. I figured we needed to sort it out somehow. I know - uh. I don’t really deserve forgiveness. I haven’t done anything about it and it’s kind of unforgivable anyway, but...”

“I-” Tommy swallows. “It’s all very complicated and shit, you know?”

It’s a conundrum, is what it is, itself brought about by none of their faults.

Such is the way of the world.

It’s time to pick his words.

Wilbur presses closer, and then so does Techno, a hand hesitantly touching Tommy’s shoulder for just a moment.

It feels like a butterfly had landed there.

“Fuck, I - I can’t forgive either of you right now,” Tommy says quietly. Despite the words, he hugs Wilbur tighter. “One day, though. I think one day I will.”

“And we’re still brothers, right?” Wilbur dares ask. Techno inhales sharply beside him.

They get a choked laugh in reply.

“Yeah. Brothers.”

The forest parts around them in their shared silence. Once again Tommy finds himself in that state of alright and not, between old anger and the wish to twist that past off for good.

He’ll be hovering in the inbetween for a long time, he thinks. Probably forever. All of them.

But that’s a reality he can face.

## Chapter End Notes

oh look more communication and also, techno and tommy have finally stopped dancing around the minefield, only took them 28 chapters and 7-8 months lmao. hey they nearly double’s wilbur’s denial

wooo boy, was this chapter a pain. first of all, chapters 26. 27, and this chapter, 28, were all originally supposed to be one chapter. yeah. that’s why there’s been little in the way of, like, physical progression and so much talking (gosh these people don’t shut up about their feelings but thats a good thing i guess lol) but hey the characters realized and worked out a lot of stuff in that time so at least stuff happened. and this last scene was by far the hardest portion to write. its the one ive been dreading since the summary’s been changed

the scene with techno and the librarian was supposed to also have the content of techno and pearl this scene but that got derailed hence why techno has two back to back conversations with the towns people, guys keeps trying to avoid social contact and the world really just said no lmao

lots of other things stacked up to make this chapter take as long as it did. finals week is here already, so that's always not fun and i should be studying for spanish right now so my grade doesn't tank (it's at a B lmao of all the grades to threaten my 4.0 unweighted it's *spanish*. big L. also ap world should have ended when i took the test but it didnt and now there's both a final to study for (which i guess i sort of will just in case) and a final project we were given two weeks to do but i havent started yet and will cram in one day (i don't really mind tho, hope my classmates like learning about the Democratic Republic of the Congo's governmental restructuring in the latter half of the 20th century XD yes we got to come up with our own topics and yes im forcing them to sit through my presentation on *that*, it'll be hilarious). also oboe auditions were due this week and i was practicing a ton (tho obviously not as much as i should have, and i'm not happy with how i did at all and am definitely not getting in but it's whatever), and i got my second covid vaccine shot that made me really tired and sleepy for two days (on the plus side i'm now fully vaccinated, pog)

also, this chapter was very rushed and may get some minor-touch ups later since the betas havent had time to look over it lmao. it's unfiltered int writing. if you notice anything... no you dont. this was mollypollykinz's fault, once again she has made me post early

anyway, thanks for reading and sticking around! appreciate all the support you guys have given for this fic <3

# drag my dark into the dawn

## Chapter Notes

[discord](#) to get pings for updates/discuss stuff!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Something has shifted between his sons. Something Phil grasps in the way he grasps Tommy's trauma and Wilbur's foggy eyes - conceptually, but without the ability to conjure the change in his chest, his mind, unlike how he might imagine the wind whistling through his feathers.

He knows enough to smile, however, when Tommy practically dumps the bloodstained goat on the porch, eyes wide like grins, and Techno's sword is in Wilbur's hands, netherite edges crusted in blood long dried.

"Looks like you all had fun," he says.

Wilbur hides his snort beneath a cough. Tommy elbows him.

"Of course," Techno says - *drawls*, really, in that mountainous way he's so fond of. "One way to describe it, I suppose."

They're getting there, Phil thinks, yet again. The skies blue and darkening, but they're sheltered and supplied and warm against each other.

The moment is jolted by Clementine's abrupt, furious barking, racing closer, no doubt having scented the fresh meat and blood. Techno kneels down to grab her by the scruff just in time to stop her from later tracking coppery prints all over their newly polished floors.

"Well then," Phil says. "Let's prepare dinner."

~\*~

The next few days are summer-spent and hazed of heat, like a dream flung across the veil to a new reality. They run and fly and laugh and sing music to the birds and trip on tree roots in the forest (that last one is mostly Tommy, and Wilbur, to the former's annoyance and latter's amusement).

That last point does bring up Phil's current concern, however, which is restoring as much movement to Wilbur's left leg as possible.

His fingers have, thankfully, healed to the point where they are just as dexterous on the guitar as before - or, if they aren't, the difference is so slight even Wilbur doesn't notice it.

Phil privately thanks the notch apples for that. He had his doubts when he first examined Wilbur's newly broken fingers, but thankfully the timing of the apples had been administered just right - not too early to rush the healing and twist the muscles back too tight, too off, but not late as to make too little of a difference either.



His leg, however - it's a limp, and one of the worse ones Phil's seen. Wilbur will never be able to put any weight of significance on it without collapsing like a matchstick house. He will never fight like he once could, all practiced forms and gracefulness. He will never again run, race, reach for high shelves atop precariously balanced chairs.

The idea sinks coldly in Phil's head during late nights, as fireflies dance on the other side of the window above.

He can't shake the lingering guilt of having failed, once again, his eldest (or, at least, presumed eldest - one of Wilbur and Techno's favorite pasttimes when they were younger was arguing over who was older, a moot point from the start given how little anyone knows about piglin hybrid biology and how they age in the first place).

(Wilbur always won those arguments. Though, it's clear Techno was never quite as bothered about it as he pretended to be.)

But - Phil is famed for surviving above all else. For crushing the odds beneath his heel and throwing them back into the winds with laughter just as wild. He had been so, so determined to pass that onto his sons.

*What happened?*

He thinks he knows. At least some, at least pieces.

Humans survived by - well, no, that's not right.

Mortals survived by - well, perhaps not? There's something strange going on with Techno and his aging, and Tommy is - well, Phil was never able to truly confirm Tommy is just a human, or mortal, for that matter.

(And, quite selfishly, perhaps, when Wilbur first came into his care and Phil had to grapple with the scale of their ages, he donned his veil of death and suddenly found more than a few ways to slip some extra years into a mortal's tenure on life.)

What is it? Phil is sure he knows the concept, at least, but to concretely define the boundaries in his head proves more troublesome than expected.

In the moments before sleep he considers it in its pieces, in nights of dreamlike winds, with the company of fireflies and owls and occasional hunting wolves.

Children have not developed the emotional stability needed to survive the world in its entirety, is what he eventually settles on. It is a thing meant to be built through countless little lessons, bruises and scrapes of hurt that will heal completely, eventually, and leave them wiser for it. A foundation slowly shorn up.

It is not meant to be an arrow to the chest, sinking through soft flesh already marred by swordpoints dragged down. It is not meant to be exile from the home, betrayal from those closest, dark stone walls singing sweetly of destruction. It is not meant to be expectations crushing, crushing, crushing.

Phil would have brushed it all off like the careless attacks they are to him, his walls a forest of trunks too tall, too thick to carve more than a surface-deep dent to. But he is... not a child.

Not in the way his children are. Wilbur and Techno are, and were, adults by their people's standards, but their people rarely ever reach that level of maturity even when their bodies are wrinkled and

creaking with age. Significant mental stability requires - at least centuries, right?

Phil doesn't know. He doesn't know how old he is, either.

No one taught him any of it. He learned on his own, and he made so many mistakes, but he *learned* because he had time to learn. The time, and motivation - it is survive or be killed.

Philza is famous for surviving against the odds.

He taught them how to fight, how to hunt, how to leap across chasms and scale cliffs sheer as the ones now around them. What is safe to forage and eat, how to safely cook their meals, how to sew and swim and suture wounds with bandages kept clean and close by.

But he never taught them when to cut their losses - sunk cost fallacy, Techno calls it. He learned it on his own, in some ways. But he's not unscarred from it either, and in no small amount.

It's not when to turn their armies back so they could fight another day - they've had lessons in war tactics, so much more than they should have been given - but when to give up the war completely.

When to draw the line between pretend and reality. When to step away and hide behind the safety of his wings.

How to see manipulation slick like blood in flesh-warm eyes. How to comprehend relationships complex as a brother dissolving into madness and a brother scared of the visions burning like an explosion barely contained beneath the skin.

Phil doesn't know how he learned it either. He thinks he has it lucky - no visions of grandeur for his name, no desire to lead the crowds towards a machine of his own design or a revolution in all things - ideas, gears, society changing fundamentally.

That is Wilbur. That is Techno, even. And unlike Tommy he never had someone to drag his loyalty along.

Does that make him more defensible, naturally?

Is he making up for that now, giving them a place to heal? Prying away the specter of these lessons delivered all wrong?

He doesn't know what else to do. So then, he has to resort to old lessons, easy ones.

"Do you think you can go any further?" he asks. A wing is hovering around Wilbur nonetheless - it's almost always there, when they're like this.

"Yes," Wilbur says. He sounds tight, but not faint or whisper tapering, so Phil nods and they begin walking again.

They've been doing this for the past few weeks - every morning, Wilbur will stretch and exercise his limbs, with special care and attention towards his twisted, mangled leg - and then, he'll take his cane, the one Phil had crafted with such care, and the two of them will begin hiking down the mountain.

Phil doesn't like the idea of Wilbur traversing such dangerous terrain at all. Many experienced, able-bodied mountaineers have met unfortunate ends against nature's unpredictability, let alone someone with a crippled leg who's previous job had been a suicidal politician.

But. Firstly, they're living here. To be familiar with the home is to win the battle for it.

And secondly, Wilbur has to get used to movement like this. Phil can not be hovering around protecting him every moment of his life, for the rest of his life, as much as he wishes to and as much as he would be willing to do so if Wilbur asked.

Wilbur is still a child in many ways. But he will grow up eventually, if Phil has any say in it at all, and he will not want his father constantly in his shadow.

(And he considers for just a moment if he could somehow make it so Wilbur will not have to drag this handicap with him. That idea, however, is quickly tossed aside.

Magic can change the body in new ways - can add, can warp, can destroy - but it always bends towards the new. It can not rewind, can not restore what was once there and is now not. Wilbur's leg healed into a new thing, which does not work the way it once did, and there is nothing that can be done to not make it so.

Phil has tried before, and he knows better than to expect different results now. He will not risk his son like that.)

It means Wilbur must practice, and better now with Phil ready to steady him, carry him, catch him if he falls.

He's doing better than most people would have. A quiet determination lines every routine he carries himself through, even when his steps falter and stumble and his mouth hangs half open in a protest stopped, eyes misty. Phil's wings are extra close then, caving around as they wade through them.

Phil can be a guide and a protector in those moments, but he can't bear the burden for Wilbur, as much as he wants to. He can only hope that Wilbur will never have to face a situation where it would endanger him critically. That he would always remain safe.

At least the episodes are getting less now.

Wilbur confesses once he's not sure they'll ever fade, those bouts where his mind drifts into a curtain of haze. He had sounded not disappointed, but *guilty*, as though it's a personal failing that should have the rest of them in disappointment instead.

Phil's chest burns at the memory. He had held Wilbur in his arms and promised it wasn't his fault, like so many things and so many responses.

Small steps, they say.

Wilbur makes it a little further down the mountain every time, taking wider steps and more precarious paths all the while. Phil is, of course, always attentive.

He hopes it's all enough. Will be enough. He's not sure he can live with the guilt of otherwise.

~\*~

The ocean is calm today. Cheerful, Tommy might even say, if it isn't for how ridiculous assigning emotions to literal salty water is.

Well, literally salty water, and a ton of seaweed. And clams. And fish, some of which have washed up flopping pathetically on the rocky shorelines. And shrimp and crabs and seagrass thin and translucent

as spiderwebs and driftwood crawling with barnacles that feel like pale tree bark, and-

Okay, the ocean is a lot of stuff.

At least it's cool stuff.

"Wilbur, I found you a new wife!" Tommy calls.

A frantically flopping - tilapia? Herring? - lands at Wilbur's feet.

Wilbur swings his cane and whacks it soaring back into the ocean.

"Hole in one," Techno says, face twitching in a smile suppressed. "Congratulations."

Ranboo actually chokes a laugh at that, to Tommy's surprise and also clearly Techno's.

"I'm pretty sure treating your wife as a golf ball is domestic abuse," Tommy says.

"One time," Wilbur sighs. "I get curious about salmon anatomy *one time*-"

"Wilbur, I have lost track of the number of times you insisted Fundy's mother was a salmon in Pogtopia," Techno says. "And that Fundy was the result of you - you-"

Techno's face actually burns a bit redder at that. He coughs awkwardly.

"Nevermind that Fundy isn't even your biological son."

"Fundy isn't?" Ranboo's head shoots up from the crab he had been poking with a silver claw.

They all blink, turning to him.

"No?" Phil blinks. "It's not physically possible, mate. At most he's adopted like my children."

Ranboo squawks, eyes widening. "Wait - none of you are related either?"

Tommy has a feeling they've all been missing some very important details.

"Not biologically," he says. "You didn't know?"

Ranboo's flubbing mumble answers that much.

Wilbur stifles a snort.

"Did..." Phil blinks. "What did you think I would... you know... to have biological children like them?"

Oh, fucking gods. They're having *this* conversation.

"I - I don't know! I just figured it had to be someone. Like - you know-" Ranboo flails his arms a bit, actually sounding quite distressed. "Okay, wait. So - Fundy *isn't* your biological son."

He directs the question at Wilbur, who responds in kind.

"No, he's not." He hesitates, and continues. "I was iffy about seriously calling him a son in the first place, considering he's older than Tommy, and that I met him when he was a teenager in one of the

cities we had been traveling through.”

“When we got to the Dream SMP one of the guards asked about our relations before allowing us into some city or another,” Tommy adds. “Wilbur just made up something about Fundy being his son so we could get through the gates earlier, since unrelated young men traveling together is apparently a sign of bandits or assassins or something.”

“I used that same excuse in the L’manberg Revolution,” Wilbur says. “Since people were asking. It gave Fundy more respect and authority.”

A frown tugs at his lips. “And - well, I guess we did have a sort of parent-child relation for a while, since I helped protect him and taught him a lot of stuff. We got really close, and I thought maybe there was something to this whole ‘son’ thing after all. Maybe I could be to him like Phil was to me. But then he burned the flag, and we disowned each other, and-”

Wilbur bites his lips, worries the edges a bit before continuing.

“I can’t call him a son in any capacity now. I’m - I’m over it. The whole betrayal thing, I mean, and I did way worse to L’Manberg anyway. Maybe... maybe if he wants to talk to me again one day, I’ll try my best.”

Tommy shifts closer, slings an arm around Wilbur.

It wasn’t never meant to be, they both know. At some point the relationship had been salvageable. If a few different choices had been made, a few things more thought out, Wilbur could have still been seeing Fundy as his son, and Fundy seeing him as a father.

It’s too late now, though. They simply have to live with it, even if for Wilbur it means staying as quiet about Fundy as possible. Tommy suspects the memories are painful for Wilbur to even revisit, and that he tries not to do so as a result.

Phil watches, worry lined in his wings now, hunched closer towards Wilbur. He can do little more than provide soft words and embraces.

Tommy doesn’t think Phil’s ever met Fundy. He’s not sure they’ve even ever seen each other, actually - Wilbur has mentioned his own father a few times around Fundy, at least, but in short snippets from which he doubts Fundy would be able to piece into anything coherent.

He wonders when the next letter from Tubbo will arrive.

“There’s... well, I guess this would be kind of weird to you all, but...” Ranboo clears his throat. “There’s actually this whole betting pool in the White House residents about whether Fundy is Wilbur’s biological son. Fundy always just said you were his father, though.”

“Of course,” Wilbur sighs. “It gives him more legitimacy to be in the Vice President position. People are used to the idea of leadership positions being passed through bloodlines, no matter how terrible the previous rulers were, and L’Manberg isn’t established as a democracy.”

“Some people didn’t like it, since you... uh, blew up L’Manberg, but Tubbo actually managed to spin some sort of narrative. About, like, Fundy being a brave spy who sacrificed everything to give Pogtopia information,” Ranboo said. “People are still mad he burned down the flag, but it does - um, they actually pulled the whole tragic redemption thing off pretty well.”

“Good for them,” Wilbur says. The phantom of a smile graces his expression - something like pride, Tommy realizes.

Wilbur always did love rambling about performing a narrative to the public. Clearly, Fundy had been paying attention.

“Yeah,” Tommy says softly. “Good for them,”

Ranboo relaxes a bit, before suddenly blinking.

“Oh, wait!” He squints. “Tommy, so - you and Wilbur. You’re not related?”

“Pretty sure we already established that’s a no,” Techno says.

Tommy’s not sure why there’s such dawning astonishment in Ranboo’s expression. Seriously, is all of New L’Manberg’s cabinet this dense about familial relations?

~\*~

Eventually the matter of family is brushed aside and Tommy gets bored of wading through the waters chasing after floating bits of whatever catches his eyes. Techno is soaked by the time he declares he’s heading back to Sanctuary as well.

Phil and Wilbur have remained relatively dry, and Ranboo’s avoided the waves like they’re acid ready to burn him. Which, Tommy supposes, isn’t entirely wrong.

While the rest of his family head back to the town, however, Tommy and Ranboo make a detour to the newest fleet of trading ships that have docked at the harbor. It’s about time another one of Tubbo’s letters arrive.

With waterproof boots and clothes reflecting sunlight like rubber, Ranboo’s at relatively low risk on the ships.

They get the letters, as expected, and a small bottle of L’Manberg wine that, to Tommy’s mild surprise, Ranboo immediately opens and takes a few large gulps of.

He shrugs in response to the questioning tilt of Tommy’s head.

Oh well.

He scans Tubbo’s letter right then and there, on the creaking planks, and carefully folds it up, slides it into a pocket to be reexamined later.

They’re about to exit, down the plank and onto stable wharf planks when a thought strikes Tommy.

“How hard would it be to buy a ship?”

Ranboo looks thoroughly baffled at the sudden question. He takes another small sip of his wine, as if it might jolt reality back down to him.

Unfortunately, reality is already here. And smacking him in the head. Hah.

“Why do you want a ship?” he asks.

“I don’t-” Tommy hesitates.

Well, actually. He doesn't know.

That's a bit of a problem.

"It's just an idea," he says. The ocean pounds a particularly large wave, pooling waters onto the deck.

"I doubt you can convince any of the captains to part with their vessels," Ranboo says. He taps a foot, splashing into a puddle. When a few droplets spray onto his gloves he doesn't even flinch. "But why though?"

Tommy takes a moment to think on it.

He's kind of bored. Maybe. It's true, but it's the kind of boredom he can take, that he's content with.

But he also has... an urge. To move, and explore, and... *hunt*, for something. He doesn't know what, only that he would be happy with new towns, new skies.

It was there before, maybe since the very beginning when he first agreed to wander the world with Wilbur instead of staying behind with Phil - but it's stronger now, significantly, probably because of the lack of people trying to kill or hurt or manipulate him.

It would have seemed ridiculous to declare even a few months ago, but now it's true. They've settled into this semi-state of calm and carefree fling of what could almost be called retirement, and while he loves it at the same time...

Well, Tommy's not sure how to get into the details.

Really, it's not about a ship. It's the idea of a ship. Of new waters.

The draw, the call - it's just a bit! It'll be a small round down and up Novixl's coastline areas. Slowly. With much gear and preparation.

After all, his family will be there to protect him. Support him. That has to be true, right? Isn't that what they've spent the past - fuck, is has it been 8 months already? Roughly? Last 8 - or 9 - months establishing?

Phil would certainly worry himself to death over the issue, though death isn't exactly an *issue* for him. Quite frankly, if Wilbur had actually died on the 16th, Tommy now has no doubt Phil would have done some weird necromancy shit to bring him back.

"Wanna explore a bit further, I guess," Tommy settles on as an answer to Ranboo. "Aren't you curious about what's outside this little valley?"

"Other towns." Ranboo rolls his eyes. "And people. Stuff."

"Yeah," Tommy says. A smile graces his lips. "I wanna wreck some shit."

Ranboo looks mildly dubious at the response, which is fair, because despite how in character it is, it *is* in fact a very dubious response. Tommy bumps his shoulder and leads them back down to the harbor.

"Just an idea," he says. "Plus, we got time. But it'd be nice to push some boundaries, yeah?"

Ranboo nods, indulges with a smile back, and he's not against the idea, random as it is. But he doesn't understand, and Tommy never expected him to.

Techno's words come back, tinged with ravine-echo and a self-assured confidence that, now that Tommy thinks back on it, was probably mostly faked. Nonetheless, the words hold true.

Building control is a slow process. Tommy will be damned if he lets unknown, unfamiliar surprises catch him off guard again.

And that starts with overcoming his nervousness - no, fear, he can admit it's fear - his fear of history repeating itself. After all, this time, either he knows what he's doing or his family will guide him out. He has to trust in that. In them.

He has to. What else does he have?

## Chapter End Notes

school is over, i am (mostly) free

some extracurriculars will still occupy me but i have a lot more time now, so hopefully updates will actually be more frequent and consistent. especially since i made a certain... uh... wager. for this fic.

anyway if you liked do let me know!

i reply to comments lives! [twitch](#)

[tumblr](#) and [twitter](#) for questions and art!



## but today i see a reflection so strange, so true

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“We can *fly*, Tommy,” Phil points out. Tommy’s cloak rustles around him, smooth as ever. “We don’t need a ship.”

Phil frowns, turning that fact over in his head. They can *fly*, and while it’s never a good idea to start randomly showing that off in the place they’re living in - hence the horses they had bought to get here - he feels confident in Tommy’s ability to maneuver in a way he hadn’t before.

Tommy shuffles, shrugging his shoulders in that casual kind of way that always brushes matters off as less important than they should be.

He’s not saying it. But at least the cue is clear.

“Well...” Phil lowers his hands, sets the half-knitted sock back onto his lap. “Is there a reason you’re suddenly interested? You didn’t seem to like the seas when we were coming here.”

“Well, I was a bit caught up on everyone being vague as fuck about what was happening,” Tommy says, raising an eyebrow. “It’s different now.”

Damn. Okay.

“Different as in...”

Both let the question hang for a moment, quiet.

“You don’t have to answer,” Phil finally says, but Tommy shakes his head at that.

“No, I - it’s just a... a thing. You know? To explore a bit around here.”

“Wings,” Phil reminds him. His feathers shift, oddly itchy.

“Right,” Tommy says. “And ships. Because...”

He frowns.

“Well, Ranboo wants to come with me.”

“Does he?” Phil asks.

“He will when I ask him,” Tommy says. Something rectangular and solid, like a plaid business card, sticks out of his cloak’s pocket. The edge is worried, yellowed with something that Phil recognizes as awfully similar to whiskey stains.

He has the wavering feeling they’re not talking about just exploration anymore.

“I’ll see who has what in town,” he says. Tommy blinks, looking somewhat surprised.

“It was just gonna be - I was just letting you know.”

“Let me help, okay?” Phil sighs. “I’m the one who’s captained a ship before, not you. Last thing I want is you and Ranboo on a vessel at risk of sinking.”

Tommy opens his mouth, and then closes it. Something strange flits over his expression.

“Okay,” he says.

~\*~

Tommy fucking swears, he expresses *one* little interest and suddenly everyone’s clamoring over it.

That’s how it was with the discs too.

He’s learning, though. No getting overly attached to large hunks of floating wood for him!

Though, Sanctuary’s vessels are...

“Listen, as much as I like you, Tommy, I’m not loaning out my ship to you,” Hbomb says. “You’re 17 and have a terrible track record of keeping your possessions safe.”

“What about Ranboo?” Tommy asks.

“Somehow, I trust Ranboo with my ship even less.”

Ranboo looks surprisingly unsurprised at the statement.

“Would Sanctuary be willing to lend one of their community owned vessels?” Wilbur asks. “I’ve seen some of them before. There’s actually quite a few.”

“You’ll have to ask Scott or Pearl about something like that,” Hbomb says, something like curiosity in his head tilt. He does that a lot, Tommy notes.

And Wilbur isn’t too hopeful, he can tell. But he drags them towards the town center regardless.

~\*~

“Why do you want to use one of our ships?” Scott asks.

Wilbur pauses, and turns to Tommy.

“Why, again?”

Great. They’ve all joined the bandwagon.

Or bandship.

“Is a man not allowed to have interests?” Tommy asks, puffing.

“Bit of a sudden interest to have.”

“That’s what I was saying,” Ranboo pipes.

Tommy twists to give Ranboo the fullest glare he can muster.

It doesn’t feel as effective as it used to.

“It’s...”

Fuck. Why is this so hard?

“Can we just do... ship first, talk later?” he finally groans. “It’s not like we’re lacking in money.”

“We’re not just selling our ships,” Scott says, frowning. “Most of them are in regular use. We need them.”

“What about the ones you’re ready to scrap?” Wilbur asks. “I know I saw one or two that are definitely not seaworthy.”

“And you have a magic wand that fixes them?” Scott asks, raising an eyebrow.

Wilbur actually laughs, at that, and Tommy snorts along with him. They both know where this is going.

“No,” Wilbur grins, full of teeth. “We have someone better.”

A beat skips by.

“Someones,” Tommy corrects.

“‘Someone’ sounds better.”

“But it’s wrong!”

“It’s not wrong if it’s convincing!”

“How is ‘someone’ more convincing than ‘someones’?”

“How do you think ‘we have someones better’ sound?”

“Fucking fantastic, that’s how-”

“You dirty liar-”

“I am not-”

~\*~

“This would take... months to fix up,” Techno says. “I have books to read and write. Crops to tend to. Monsters to kill. Why are we fixing up a ship?”

“It’s-”

Tommy hesitates. He pokes at the ship’s keel, solid and tinged with green.

It’s mostly the sides missing chunks, as if a giant shark had torn them like flesh from wooden bone. The mast is nonexistent too and - well, beyond that, Tommy really has no idea. Techno and Phil are the ship experts, not him.

“You guys never asked why Wilbur wanted to explore,” he finally says. “Promise I’m not founding more countries or starting a vodka empire or something.”

“Well, that’s reassuring,” Techno says flatly. Tommy huffs out his chest.

“Of course it is! That’s me, the great Tommy Innit, most reliable and reassuring person in the world-”

“The town counsel has agreed to let us work on it here, but it’ll probably be next spring by the time it’s done,” Techno says. “Or at least, by the time we can use it, since the oceans are frozen over in the winter. You sure you don’t want to just bribe a merchant ship’s captain to take you around some places?”

“Why not both?” Phil asks. “I could go for a little sea voyage too.”

Techno groans. “Not you too. Why can’t we just have a nice little peaceful retirement-”

“That’s exactly what we’re having!” Tommy argues. “A perfectly peaceful retirement. Unless you wanna go to war with the ocean, in which case, go right fucking ahead.”

“He’s got a point,” Wilbur says. “At the very least it’s another little hobby to keep our hands busy.”

Ranboo nods along, though he looks vaguely lost in the conversation. Tommy makes a note to catch him up later.

“Ship-fixing it is, then,” Techno sighs. “Phil, how much seasoned wood do you think we can buy off Sanctuary?”

~\*~

*Anyway, I’m glad to hear New L’Manberg is doing better than it was before. I’ve seen a few more of your ships in the harbor too, so trade’s running smoothly around here, at least. Keep kicking Dream’s ass for me, yeah?*

*Now that your matters are addressed, here’s your allowance of Tommy Innit awesomeness about Tommy Innit. Cherish it greatly.*

*Tubbo, have you ever felt the sudden drive to just... do something? Not in a weird mindcontrolly way, but just, like... a desire. I think it’s how Techno describes his urge for blood and violence, or Wilbur feels his need to... well, to be honest, talk like a pretentious asshole. But also to lead a revolution and build a new nation and instill himself as leader. I think he was always looking for that recognition, from the moment when he began planning to leave Phil’s house.*

*I think I took after Phil the most, though. Phil never really stays around one area for a long time - a long time to him, anyway. A few decades, usually, unless he’s caught up in other endeavors.*

*Phil explores. He moves. I think it has something to do with what he is, not that I know any details. Anything that has wings and is from the End is an End avian, unless you’re the Ender Dragon. Phil doesn’t really like talking about it. I’m not sure even he has much of a complete picture. I once heard him say he’s really young by his people’s standards, but the fucker’s at least two thousand years old, so - yeah.*

*He also adopted Techno, Wilbur, and me within like ten years or something. Less, actually. Apparently one day he just got broody and felt the need to take care of children. Another strange - desire that rose out of seemingly nowhere, though I suspect Phil knows more about it than he’s letting on.*

*It’s weird, is what I’m saying. I guess some people are just driven like that. Maybe my constant desire to be free and moving is just manifesting itself in other ways. But nowadays I feel an itch to soar.*

*Now that I think about it, that's what the wings were too. An escape mechanism, sure... but I feel so very myself when I fly or glide. I do it all the time now, with Phil's cloak.*

*I have dreams. We all do - well, maybe Dream doesn't. Wouldn't that be funny? Anyway, when they're not about Pogtopia or war shit or my family abandoning me, they're about flying.*

*Sometimes, it's through the air. Sometimes, it's through the ocean.*

*Sometimes, it's through the dark, endless, starless void. Not even night, though I thought of it as such originally. Just... void.*

*And strangely enough, I'm never afraid in those dreams. In fact, I feel like I'm soaring home.*

~\*~

Phil insists that if they would be messing around with ships, they might as well brush up on their swimming skills.

Ranboo and Wilbur are, of course, exempt from this. So is Techno, after he completed a quick lap a league out and back at a speed that left Hbomb's mouth hanging like a cave entrance.

Techno receives some satisfaction from that. It's been a while since he's utterly destroyed expectations, and even if this isn't a competition, knowing he's still (literal) leagues ahead of everyone else is a nice, reassuring reminder. His skills aren't deteriorating or something. He can keep investing time on his potato book, on his violin, on the gardens in front of their house.

This means that when Phil says "they", he really means Tommy. Tommy, of course, objected with a declaration that Phil shouldn't be exempt either.

"After all, you literally captained a ship, oh wise fucking captain," he says, expression completely serene in that *I dare you* kind of way Techno hadn't realized Tommy understood. "Surely a little water is no problem."

Phil had accepted. And so, when Tommy has demonstrated every swimming technique Techno and Hbomb could remember to call out and is dragging himself out the water and towards them, hair tousled with seaweed and flinging water with the only care being to not aim towards Ranboo, Phil lines himself against the water's edge and sheds his cloak on the rocks.

It's moments like these that has Techno thanking the lack of sand on this particular beach. It's all rocky, gray and green, rough and chipped hexagonals, an ancient volcanic artefact of natural geography. Unrevealing in the secrets of its formation, despairing as he and Wilbur are over such things, similar to the being that now stands facing the ocean upon it.

"What's wrong? Scared?" Tommy yells to Phil, who is picking at the short sleeves of his shirt. His pants are mid-length and band close to the skin at the ends, so Techno isn't quite sure what the problem is either.

Phil flashes back to them a single roll of his eyes. He then wades further, until the water is at knee length and lapping like Clementine when she's hungry for head pats - and then, with a thundering *woosh* like he's taking off from a dead, flat standstill, his entire figure plunges into the sky-clear tides.

"Well," Wilbur says, barely audible over Tommy's breathy whisper of "I forgot he does that."

“Do what?” Ranboo asks, squinting, but he has his answer when a dark, roughly shark-shaped shadow zips below the rolls of blue faster than even when Techno swam, and breaks through the waters spinning in circular like a trident soaring and enchanted.

Phil’s wings snap out when he reaches his peak and then, he’s gliding above them again, like a penguin morphed into an albatross, laps lazy and spiraled and dripping smug seawater on the unfortunate souls below. Techno thinks he could commit this to proper memory and calculate the parabolic line of the descent that he would have taken otherwise, if he wanted to. And he somewhat does, strangely enough.

The perks - or perils - of having free time.

“That was...” Hbomb is impressed, that much Techno can see. So is Ranboo. None of Phil’s children are, however, if only because they witnessed it so many times in their childhoods.

“Wings are versatile underwater too,” Phil informs them when he finally lands, a good few minutes later. Techno has a feeling he’s missed the experience as well, and found the sky tempting enough to stay a little longer than necessary.

“But-” Hbomb tilts his head, eyes gleaming. “Shouldn’t feathers drag in the water?”

“Not too much if I fold them tight enough and adjust the wing structure.” Phil says. “At that point they work well enough as fins. Not as good as real ones, of course, but I usually gain enough speed from it.”

“No bird’s wings can bend their structure like that,” Hbomb says, and he’s peering at the feathers - now relaxed and soaked only at the edges. Thankfully, by now he knows better than to touch them.

“Hate to tell you, mate,” Phil laughs. “But I’m not a bird.”

There aren’t even any birds in the End, Techno recalls.

Ranboo evidently has the same thought, face scrunched in what could be contemplation. Or confusion. Or just about anything, really.

Hbomb nods at Phil’s answer, slowly. Phil’s wings shift - rattle, just a bit. Shakier towards the top.

Techno opens his mouth, but Tommy beats him to it.

“We should see how well Clementine swims sometimes,” he says. And Hbomb and Ranboo might not recognize all the subtleties of what Phil’s wings say about his mood, but they know enough to drop that particular line of conversation.

“I’ll bet 10 gold pieces she refuses to go in,” Ranboo offers. Wilbur quickly takes him up on it.

~\*~

Phil can’t say he is particularly surprised when Hbomb tracks him down for a “little chat” one night. Wilbur has just relearned the elytra enough to safely fly back with Tommy and Techno, so he’s stayed behind to get just a small drink of beer before making his own way home.

The plans are derailed when Hbomb slides up to him in the half-full room of the - well, it’s got almost enough options to be called a restaurant. The sea of conversation around them is enough to mask their own, so Phil humors him with a drawled “yes?”

An eyebrow shoots up at the acknowledgement.

“You sound like Technoblade when you say that,” he notes, leaning forward with a bit too much eagerness.

“It’s more accurate to say that Techno sounds like me,” Phil says. A smile tugs at his lips, one of admission and maybe-guilt, despite himself.

It’s not something to be proud of, his parenting.

“I... that’s fair, actually,” Hbomb says. “I didn’t realize, at first.”

“Neither did Ranboo,” Phil says. “I suppose it’s an easy enough mistake to make.”

Easy to mistake them as acquaintances, as friends, as something so far removed from *father* and *sons*. Phil wonders whether they even are father and sons anymore, or just some nebulous maybe-family still strung together by old loyalty.

“But he’s adopted, right? Unlike Wilbur or Tommy? I’d think so. He seems more... on your level, and with the piglin features, but if not I won’t judge,” Hbomb says.

Phil blinks. He wonders how many more times this will have to be stated - not many, probably. Hbomb and Ranboo are the only other ones around here who know enough backstory to be privy to such details.

“They’re all adopted,” Phil says. “I don’t have biological children. I doubt that’s even possible, actually.”

Hbomb looks very much like the fish out of water they had been playing with before.

“Oh! I’m sorry. That’s gotta suck-”

“No,” Phil says, shutting him down right there by sipping his beer. He takes a moment to consider that fact that more than a few people have assumed Techno was the result of him fucking a piglin, and that Wilbur’s claim about his salmon related escapades did not help matters at all, and then decides he doesn’t want to consider it any further today. “I meant that End avians are too far removed from any other species to produce hybrid children, and there is no other End avian except me. That I know of, anyway.”

He has his hunches, his guesses, but they’re functionally extinct at this point. No impact as a whole on habitats, no population patterns and fluctuations.

Oh well. They’ve had a good run. Phil’s hatching had been considered a miracle - he would be astonished if there are more than a half a dozen hatchings after him, in the several millennia that have followed.

“It’s all a moot point, anyway,” he adds. “I don’t care about biological children. I care about my sons.”

“Not many people would see it like that,” Hbomb says, tilting his head. “You gotta admit - you’re such a strange case, Philza. To everyone back in L’Manberg and the Dream SMP, you just showed up on the 16th, talked to Wilbur for a bit, and then took him, Tommy, and Techno into who-knows-where. No one knew *anything* about you, especially since you kept your wings hidden and they never realized you were *the* Philza.”

“The last thing we need is more attention,” Phil says. He takes another sip - the beer buzzes slightly on his tongue, froth settling.

“Right. I’m just curious, though - I can see getting attached to children you’re caring for, but why did you suddenly just adopt them in the first place? Aren’t you... old?”

“Very old, by your standards,” Phil admits. “Maybe even by mine - I’ve spent a lot of time around mortals. But to my species I’m rather early into maturity.”

If their societies still existed, all glowing cities and spirals, environment safe instead of hostile, he would probably have a partner by now. Be raising hatchlings of their own.

Phil wasn’t adverse to the idea back when he roamed alone, but raising his sons has left it feeling like an impossibility to him, a distant thought that repulses all his instincts. How could anyone else understand them, love them, care for them the way Phil has for the past decade or two? Even if - when - his sons don’t need that attention anymore, no one else was there for their pivotal adolescent years the way Phil both was and wasn’t.

End avians are protective of their young - unnaturally so. They’re also extremely predisposed to having young - a factor of both culture and evolution, probably. The End is an unforgiving place to make a home.

Too unforgiving, in the end.

“Finally succumbed to the urge to nest,” Phil says, trying for a joking angle. “Really am more a bird than I thought, huh?”

He feels like he’s speedrun half his life, with his sons, not that it really matters with his immortality. Still, he doesn’t think there will ever again be children who are to him what they are.

“Maybe,” Hbomb says. “You did... uh. A job, alright.”

Phil sighs, and downs the rest of his beer. It’s oddly fiery in his throat.

“Yeah,” he chuckles morosely. “I guess that’s what happens when someone utterly unprepared to raise children - children of their own species, let alone mortal children from another - adopts the first stray that catches their attention just because they felt the need to take care of something.”

He sighs, sprawls himself back in his chair.

“For whatever it says about me,” he quietly admits, “I can’t bring myself to regret it.”

Hbomb’s eyes are glittering, too knowing, in the flicker of lantern lights.

“For what it says about your sons,” he responds, “I don’t think they regret it either.”

## Chapter End Notes

hbomb being more aware than you’d expect go brr he’s such a fun character to write and phil lmao, he really cant escape the questions



also there was supposed to be a techno and ranboo scene in this chapter but i decided it would work better in the beginning of the next one, which hopefully comes out soon too

oh yeah this came out fast didnt it? If you liked... feedback always appreciated very much!! <3

also chapter 30 pog!!! milestone haha remember when i thought this fic would end at like 20 chapters?

# getting bored of walls too

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The thing about Ranboo, for Techno at least, is that there's really no foundation at all for where they'll stand. Complete strangers they are not, even when they first met months ago before the gaze of a shifting Tommy, both having made perception their blades and reputations their arena.

It's a situation that has so far been performed by exchanging but a few passing acknowledgments when they cross paths. After all, there is no reason for them to be in close proximity if not for Tommy, who is then more than welcome to absorb the lingering attention.

The problem with not engaging in actual interaction with a dearly beloved little brother's new best friend, or pseudo-best friend, or act-like-best-friends-because-their-mutual-best-friend-is-busy-being-a-goverment-and-not-getting-murdered-friend-*friend*, is that is that the odds are not in Techno's favor. A few times are doable, but they stack up too fast for either to properly prepare, and so one of them is bound to slip eventually.

Techno is, secretly, somewhat guilty and perhaps even ashamed it didn't turn out to be him. Though he's not quite sure why he would be ashamed, of all things, for *not* tripping the wire.

"What are you writing?"

That is the beginning of the end, where his world falls apart. He doesn't *know*, but he has an *inkling*, a piece of recognition, and here that might as well be the same.

Techno catalogues the question away like an errant quest, hands writing near like a machine, set on their destination for the end of his stream of thought. Thankfully, this one ends relatively quickly, at just four paragraphs of analysis later.

When he finally looks up, Ranboo is - surprisingly - still there. It is then Techno draws acknowledgement to the highest of his priorities.

"Hm?"

He internally curses himself for the vagueness, but Ranboo answers nonetheless. Not much else to do but war on, he supposes.

"Um - writing? When I'm here you're always reading, writing, or reading your writing," Ranboo says.

Techno considers the observation.

"You usually arrive to engage with Tommy in the afternoons, when most of our outdoor work is done," he finally answers. "In this free time I write, so it's merely a quirk of our schedule alignments that give me the appearance of spending more time on an endeavor than what is actual fact."

"Oh," Ranboo says. He twists the ring around his finger - emerald jeweled, Techno notes with a pang. "So what *are* you writing?"

“Right now, I am attempting to navigate a particularly stubborn section on the profitability of growing potatoes in low-humidity areas with a high salt concentration in the soil,” Techno says. It’s painful, really, how hard it’s fought him - not even the content itself, as he had had sorted that years ago and merely needed to reorganize and reread old notes - but instead placement of information tangled like hair strands. So many ways to arrange something that looks completely awful from a distanced judging.

“Ah,” Ranboo says. “I - well. I guess I should have expected something like this.”

The question tumbles out faster than Techno can veto it, to his further embarrassment now.

“Do they still tell that story about me and Squid, back in Hypixel?” he asks instead. “About the Potato War?”

“All the time,” Ranboo says, with something long-suffering in his tone. “You’d think years would have dulled it by now, but it’s - well. It’s sort of an in-joke. People go like ‘oh, you wanna start a war over it’? about rankings, or ‘I’ll need at least 500 million of these’ when they want to purposefully exaggerate.”

“Linguistic development as caused by a singular point of promotion,” Techno says. He hadn’t considered that sort of change, actually, though it makes sense something like it would tangle across him eventually. “Maybe that should be my next project.”

He makes a small note of it in the inside cover, where such notes go. Writing ideas and such, most of which to never see the scratch of quill again.

“Next project? So you’re not conquering? Or fighting some - some war?” Ranboo suddenly asks. “Or - or-”

Techno stills. Something - perhaps the expectation in the way he says *war*; all tilted forward and singularly driven, or the way pain twists like a ribbon across his face and unfurling just as quickly, but regardless - something tells Techno that Ranboo has been penting this question for a while.

Since before they met each other, or even knew they would meet, likely.

“I...” And regardless of *that*, the implications and its truth, there hangs the question itself. Techno lowers his head.

“Don’t worry, violence will find me somehow,” he says. He smiles at that, all sharp angles and teeth, probably coming off as filled with far more threat than he intends.

“It’s like a stubborn feather,” Techno then tries, lightening his expression and going for the usual joking angle. “Won’t let go. Sort of like these people that live with me, actually.”

Ranboo’s utterly unimpressed expression, flat and almost glaring, in fact, serves only as further proof that none of Techno’s jokes are actually funny. He sends a mental sorry to his family, for having to indulge him with such convincing laughter all these years.

“So... your projects include violence and writing?” he asks. At this, Techno is rather abruptly reminded of the fact that Ranboo has no idea he and Whitelisted are the same person.

“Uh... I only have writing planned,” Techno says slowly. “I’m just sayin’, giving my past track record... heh. You know. Something will have me swinging a sword soon, probably.”

At Ranboo's silence, he desperately forges on. Gods, why does his heart start pounding so hard around this topic *every single time*?

"Promise it won't be towards you though," he offers. "Or to - uh. Anyone in Sanctuary. Unless they try to murder my family, in which case that's a big no."

"You think violence follows you around? Like - like some sort of destiny?" Ranboo asks. "And - and you can't stop it?"

He suddenly sounds small. So small.

Techno knows where that assessment of his character came from. It's brought up like a fact about him all the time in Hypixel - in the rest of the world, too, but especially Hypixel, where his name and the concept of *blood* tangos in a never-ending loop that has had him waking up sickened and with a face caked of salt too many times.

*Technoblade's destiny is to fight.*

*It's his destiny.*

*It's... it's...*

"I... I'm not sure how much I believe in this predestination stuff," Techno says. He tries to keep his fingers still, he really does, but eventually he has to resort to digging blunted claws into the wood supports of his chair so they don't rip fragile paper. It hurts, just a bit. "Destiny implies... a lot of stuff. But you know how people are just better at some things and worse at others? Well, for some they end up with certain behaviors because of it. Certain purposes."

Ranboo nods, up and down like a clock tick. He doesn't move from his position a few feet away.

Techno turns until Ranboo is completely out of sight.

"Well, my purpose has always been to spill blood. I can try to fight against it - that's what the books are for. And I like readin' and writin' and stuff. But there's - maybe there was a time where it wasn't so inevitable, and maybe that time could have gone on longer if I had made some different choices. But it's too late for that."

"Oh," Ranboo says softly. "Oh."

Techno doesn't know what that means. By now he's too tired to care.

Suddenly the book in his hands, laden of his own ink, is heavy as weighted iron chains. He slides it back into its place on the table-shelf beside him, and pretends not to notice how his fingers have grasped it tight enough to leave dust-thin marks.

"I'm going to bed now," he says, though the sky is tinged only with the faintest pink at the edges, and Phil and Wilbur and Tommy are still outside, possibly arguing over what to have for dinner and awaiting Techno to tiebreak.

Oh.

"Let - uh. Let my family know. That I'm going to bed. Tell them I'm sorry." Techno hesitates, again. And despite every bit of logic scathing even the idea of saying it, he blurts out one more thing.

“I’m sorry about L’Manberg, too.”

Then, he flees back to him and Wilbur’s shared room.

~\*~

Somewhere between feeding chickens and carrying wood and browsing trade ships and chowing down fried minnows in the town square, Tommy and Ranboo decide to have a sparring match.

It’s Ranboo who brings it up first, actually - and in fact, Tommy’s decently sure if he hadn’t brought it up, it would never have happened... *ever*. At all.

Which is strange to think about, that the motions of the sword which he once carried daily with darting eyes and stifled gasps of fear are now so far removed from the priorities of his mind. But nonetheless, it’s true.

Beyond slicing down the occasional stray monster in the forests beyond their home (and even then, Tommy usually fires a crossbow bolt, like Wilbur and Techno do), he hasn’t fought with a sword since the battle of Manberg.

So when Ranboo asks, one day when the wind has cooled to a true chill for the first time since spring, to practice swordfighting-

Tommy takes a few moments to almost stutter out an acceptance. In that time battle and weakness and fire burn in his chest, and for a few seconds it seems like the taste of dirty copper will never be scrubbed off his tongue.

But he accepts nonetheless, and so now they are in an empty stretch of clearing behind the house. A patio faces them, a table and chairs and shaded by roofing extended far out. But there’s no one else to watch - Techno is staying in his room later than usual this morning while Wilbur and Phil are continuing their mountain-descending-and-climbing exercises.

So it’s just them two. Just them two and dulled wooden blades that they both know how to train with.

Tommy waits for the first strike. He almost always does, when there’s nowhere to hide, to stage an ambush from.

Well, not exactly. He almost always *flees*, because as much as he proclaims of bravery and being a true man, if he didn’t have at least some sense of self-preservation he would have long since died in the two wars he’s fought in. It’s quite frankly miraculous, how many death-defying situations he’s managed to rack up.

When Ranboo flashes his sword down from the left, Tommy glances the blow up with his own blade. He swings his body with the motion, drags his opponent’s arms to the sheer right before jolting downwards with his sword’s hilt, a disarming act.

The sword wrenches out of Ranboo’s hand, and clatters dully onto the grass. He wastes no time swiping it into his other hand with a flick of his boot.

“That was...” Ranboo frowns. He blinks at Tommy, and then at his wood sword now being held out hilt first towards him.

He takes it. Wipes the dew-stained handle with his shirt end.

“You didn’t follow up on your attack,” Tommy says. He shrugs. “Good idea, doing a quick slash towards my left, but have a contingency plan for if I respond fast enough.”

Though, with the speed of Ranboo’s acceleration most people would have gotten their stomachs cleaved clean in half right then and there in a real fight. Tommy can give him credit for that.

“Oh.” A pause. And then; “best of five?”

“Deal.”

They resume their previous stances.

Ranboo’s a good fighter, actually - surprisingly slippery and hard to pin a hit on, despite his tall and lanky figure. He whips his body back and forth, side to side, lunges and feints and strikes like a cobra, or a mantis, or particularly agile flamingo.

Point is - good fighter.

Hypixel royalty (or champions, they call them *champions* over there, but close enough) are all decent fighters, at least, unless some people lean into the nepotism. Technically, anyone can become a champion and get all the perks that come with it - as long as they pay an outrageous fee to partake in a famously difficult test of skill that involves far more than just fighting.

Children of current champions don’t have to pay the fee to take the test. They also face far more lenient scoring systems.

Alright, so maybe the entire system is still nepotism.

Which is probably why Ranboo, one such champion, finds himself pressed at neck point four times in a row by a child younger than him who hasn’t fought in 8 months, but can *fight*.

Tommy is a better swordsman than Ranboo, that much he can tell after their session. It’s not even all Ranboo’s fault, though, even if he’s actually pretty bad by champion standards (again, *nepotism*). Hypixel produces some of the world's best *duelers* - but fighting others for competitive sport, bound by rules and etiquette, is completely different from the lawless muddles of war.

Ranboo duels to win - to disarm or pin down or knock Tommy away as if there is some void right behind ready to catch him with a net.

Tommy fights to survive. He fights like how Phil taught him, like how Techno taught him (strategies and movements all derived and modified from Phil as well), and he fights like would die otherwise, lunges quick and desperate and clocked against the opponent’s movements, always pushing to the forward, the future - he fights like an abyss lurks in every corner, waging war against his existence, like he is a dying flame who must constantly snatch kindling from death’s bottomless jaws.

He is the better swordsman here. At the end of the matches, as Ranboo looks down at him with wide eyes, impressed and starry, almost *jealous* in that way Hypixel idolizes the strong, the swift, the powerful - Tommy almost wishes he isn’t.

After all, the Tommy of 3 years ago was a worse swordsman than the Ranboo of today.

~\*~

“I have something to show you,” Tommy says after another few rounds of sparring, only one of which Ranboo won by managing to trip and then pin him in place with a foot long enough to poke the sword against his chest. Tommy had congratulated him on thinking outside the box afterwards.

“Oh?”

“Yeah. follow me.”

Beyond the house’s backdoor and patio and the clearing they are training is more forest - it doesn’t extend very far out before reaching a wall of cliffs, over which Tommy knows is a far steeper, sheerer drop.

But the forest is big enough to take a good few minutes to walk through, and denser than usual to match. Tommy leads Ranboo through the vague path that can’t really be called a path, so much as a collection of memories and steps retraced.

When they reach the far smaller clearing devoid of trees and almost of undergrowth, he stops and Ranboo falls into a halt beside him.

“Are these moobloom flowers?” Ranboo asks. He kneels down, examines one closely. “They’re - aren’t they super expensive and rare?”

“Only native to a tiny island in the far south, yeah,” Tommy says. “When we were coming here, we stopped by a lot of port cities and Techno bought me some of their bulbs. Since... since Tubbo used to go on and on about how much bees loved them, you know? So I would talk about them too.”

“There’s no beehives around here,” Ranboo says.

“I know,” Tommy says. “I’ve noticed.”

It’s an oddly cool day, for the summer.

“I think the altitude’s too high, so most of the bees are hiveless species that live their lives solo,” Ranboo hums. “Tubbo loves his bee house and his beekeeping and taking care of hives, but... I always liked the solo bees more, you know? They always seem happier to me, somehow. More free.”

“They don’t have a responsibility to a hive,” Tommy says. One said bee is hovering around the mooblooms before them, a distant dot of fuzz streaked with purple. The almost iridescent sheens of color hints at its nature, but he knows for certain because it’s too large to be a worker, and any queen would not be gathering nectar or pollen right now.

“That’s true,” Ranboo says.

“And they’re usually overlooked while everyone else focuses on their eusocial cousins,” Tommy adds.

“Eusocial?” Ranboo sounds surprised.

“Surprised that I know it?” Tommy guesses, and the wince confirms it.

He shrugs. He’s used to such underestimations.

“Techno and Wilbur have a lot of interests. I usually got dragged along when I was younger,” Tommy says. “Techno was the one who originally mentioned moobloom bulbs to Tubbo in Pogtopia, actually,

and then Tubbo had this period where he was completely fascinated with them.”

“I didn’t peg Techno as the type too…” Ranboo trails off, looking away.

“Techno is a fucking nerd,” Tommy snorts. “I swear, he’s all like ‘ooh, I’m such a fearsome warrior, I’ve killed all these people and I’ve got these stupid fancy titles like the Blood God and The Blade and Potato Champion and Hypixel Bedwars Winstreak Record Holder’, whatever the fuck that even means, but throw an interesting looking book at him and he’ll drop the sword to shut himself in his room reading and analyzing for the next week.”

“Really?” Ranboo asks. He seems skeptical, mouth pursed.

Everyone’s always skeptical.

“When have you seen Techno doing more?” Tommy asks. “Killing stuff, or… literally anything else?”

“Techno says the reason I see him writing all the time is because our schedules coincide with each others’ like that or something,” Ranboo says.

“The rest of the time is spent in the garden here or in Sanctuary, or reading or cooking or practicing violin,” Tommy says. “He even sits down to sew stuff with Phil like an old fucking loser sometimes.”

He pauses. Quieter, with something heavier settling, he says, “I don’t see why everyone makes Techno and violence out to be such a big deal together.”

Withers and screams and execution, and Tommy loathes it so much, and they burn his dreams like hot iron, but-

Until the festival, Techno had never come off as anything near the bloodthirsty hound people make him sound like. It was years and years of… well, quite frankly, Techno had been a better brother than Wilbur. He was kind and patient and funny and indulged in all of Tommy’s little requests unless they were completely ridiculous, and unlike Wilbur he had always considered how his actions might affect Tommy, or at least *tried* to, up until the festival.

And yes, there were these gaps, when Techno was off fighting wars or tournaments, and maybe some of these gaps were pretty big, and especially the one just before Pogtopia - but the Techno during Tubbo’s execution, during the pit fight, had been a near *stranger*. Just close enough for Tommy to recognize but not stop.

He and Wilbur hadn’t been the only ones to change in those years.

Tommy wishes he doesn’t know how anyone can look at the awkward, book touting nerd with fucking *glasses* and think his main purpose is drinking blood or whatever weird shit the world’s come up with most recently.

But he does know how. Once, he didn’t, but now he does.

He still can’t see Techno like that, though.

They’re brothers. They love each other and they still do. They’ve worked so hard towards that reality.

“I don’t - I don’t think Techno’s helped that perception,” Ranboo says.

“What?” Tommy snaps his head up.



“Well - the perception that he’s not all violence.” Ranboo sits down, brushes a moobloom flower and inhales the sweetness like it’s a calming herbal tea. Maybe it is to him.

Tommy wonders if Phil could make moobloom tea for them. Pick just a flower or two to try - there’s at least ten here, each bulb sprouting more than one. Or, Techno might have more luck figuring it out. He loves his experiments, his observations. And his plants - Techno has a weird fucking fascination with plants in general, and not just potatoes.

The thought still makes his stomach twist, however, Techno intruding into this clearing. *Intruding* - why would Tommy describe it like that? Techno was the one who bought the bulbs for him in the first place.

But he just knows that he’s still unsettled by the idea, something like nervousness and fear grinded to a paste together within his chest, and that he isn’t telling any of his family about where he keeps them anytime soon.

Not that it’s too hard to accidentally stumble upon them.

“What I mean is that-” Ranboo carefully trails a claw down silky petals, all rounded edges and five-star shaped. “Techno seems to think differently than you? About that?”

“Really,” Tommy says, slowly and like he’s tasting the concept in his mouth, dragged out with the pronunciation.

How would Techno think differently?

“I’m - um. I don’t know the details. But maybe you should - keep it in mind,” Ranboo says. His face winces, like he’s recalling something unpleasant. Multiple somethings unpleasant. “As much as we don’t want it, perceptions... change people. For the worse, usually.”

“I know,” Tommy whispers. He thinks of the growing pile of letters Tubbo has written to him, stacked in his drawer that he’s made Phil promise to never touch.

Unfortunately, he knows too well.

## Chapter End Notes

Techno: haha no i dont have problems, unlike the rest of my family i am a completely put together being who knows exactly where they’re going in life and has no doubts about anything at all

aka the chapter where ranboo finally accepts his role as a side character

i should be ashamed of the chapter title but instead im unnecessarily proud

also, yes, there are thousands of species of bees that don’t form hives, but instead survive out in the world on their own and only meeting up to mate like many other solitary insects. European honeybees are actually an invasive species in north america that have threatened the population of many of these native bees that also do an important job pollinating north american

ecosystems. there's, of course, other solo species on other continents but i live in NA so im more familiar with the situation here

# but i did grow weary and i settled down

## Chapter Notes

[amazing fanart](#) of various scenes in this fic by @LarsOfTheStars on Twitter! holy damn its so good

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Did you know this ship’s name is *The Amari*?” Wilbur asks.

Ranboo’s head shoots up. Tommy’s is slower to follow, but eventually he is peering at the faint silver lettering Wilbur has tapped on as well. The green stains show it has previously been hidden below a particularly stubborn and dense clump of algae, which Techno has just managed to scrape off a few minutes ago.

Sure enough, *The Amari* can now be made out, bits of paint still strong enough to gleam the sunlight, though there are countless scrapes and slashes and remaining algae flecks still marring the name.

Tommy had seen bits of the letters before, as the white paint was rather hard to miss, but he hadn’t realized they spelled something until now.

“That’s not - that’s not the type of name ships around here are usually given.” Phil frowns.

Ranboo nods, eyes scrunching as though trying to recall something - actually, scratch that, he’s definitely trying to recall something. Because he almost always is.

Sure enough, the memory book flips out, and then flips back into his pocket just a few moments later.

That has to be a new record, or at least something close to it.

Over the past few months, Tommy’s noticed Ranboo takes increasingly less time to check his book or recall things, and seems to remember more as well. He wonders what that’s about.

Not that it’s bad - far from it, of course. But he has more time to wonder about such things now.

“It’s similar to a lot of ship names down in the southern nations and cities.” Ranboo says. “*The Amari*, *The Iseri*, *The Oreli*-”

Wilbur snorts at that last one, for some reason.

“You make it sound like they’re all-” Phil breaks off, and shakes his head. “Anyway, Ranboo is right. The name is very much from southern ports. More common on the other continent’s south, actually. Up here in Novixl’s northeast they have names like-”

“Like *Sanctuary*?” Tommy asks, raising an eyebrow.

“Yep,” Wilbur says. “It’s only recently there are more than one or two established trade routes between the northeastern and southeastern parts of Novixl, actually, since the ocean currents aren’t

very cooperative and there's this giant mountain range in the way which may or may not make travel a little difficult."

Phil smothers a quiet laugh.

"There's been more integration lately, of course - trade between Novixl's coasts, and between Novixl and other continents, are both at the highest volumes history has seen," Wilbur continues, voice pacing faster, slightly, in that way it used to back before fighting wars, when he would ramble on and on about a subject he holds passion for. For a moment Tommy's chest constricts tight at the faded familiarity, like a long-ago childhood dream he is just suddenly reexperiencing again.

"But the naming conventions haven't had much chance to undergo cultural diffusion just yet. Up here are city and ship names like *Sanctuary*, *Succession*, *Possibility*-"

"Why are they all so fucking weird?" Tommy groans, pushing down the pang inside him. "I was gonna say a name like *The Amari* is boring, but that's - that's even worse."

"Still better than a name like *Dream*," Techno's voice echoes, muffled around the edges, from inside the ship's hull. The sound of snapping wood follows.

"You should hear some of the names the island cities east of Hypixel have," Ranboo snorts.

"Oh yeah, I've heard stories," Wilbur grins. "Wasn't there one like - *Where One-Hearted Crows Perish From Children After Dawn* or something?"

"They call them *cactuses* over there, but yeah," Ranboo says. "My favorite is *Where Order's Servant Creeps Unto Death Upon the Third Episode*. Most of them aren't as bad, though."

"More typical ones aren't much better, actually!" Techno calls. "I've had to visit so many. Why would anyone call their city *Waving Wing of Breelarch Pines* or *House of Undying Deers*?"

"In that last one's defense, it did start off as the vacation manor of a noble who came from a family called the House of Undying Deers," Phil offers. "I met him when he was permanently moving his family over there, actually. Offered to buy some land on the island, but he turned me down."

"Pity," Wilbur says. "It's a pretty important trading post around that area these days."

"I know," Phil sighs. "Nearby Hypixel was just beginning to gather a reputation back then too. Hence why I wanted to invest."

"We can always sail down there in our new ship and take over the fucking place," Tommy says.

"We'll need a bigger ship than this one," Phil laughs. "It's sturdy enough to carry us up and down coastlines, but not nearly across the ocean."

Tommy knows that already, of course, though he glances at the ocean. Can't help himself.

Ranboo follows his gaze. Or maybe Tommy followed his. It doesn't matter that much in the end, though.

"Anyway, are we keeping the name?" Techno asks, suddenly.

He's immediately clamored over with a "fuck no" by Tommy and "that would be boring" by Wilbur.

“Then what’s its new name?” Techno pauses, and then adds, “I don’t care.”

Another snap of wood, and then the distinct sound of a hammer pounding down a steel nail head.

“You don’t have to leave all the decisions to us,” Phil says. “I know you have plenty of ideas yourself.”

Another pause, longer.

“Nah, I’m fine. Being creative? Sounds way too tedious.”

A particularly loud thunk echoes from the ship. Techno mutters something too quiet for any of them to make out.

“Let’s call it something like *Where Tommy Bashes In Dream’s Head*,” Ranboo suggests, trying and failing to hide a smirk.

Tommy whacks him on the shoulder.

“I’ll have you know I do not have violent, uncontrolled tendencies,” he huffs. “No starting new wars for me. Even if Dream would deserve it.”

“Then let’s name it something like *Where Ranboo Bashes in Dream’s Head After Tubbo Has Had His Turn*,” Ranboo offers again. The smirk is wider.

Phil laughs, choking off the end.

“Damn,” he manages. “When did you get so sassy?”

“Tubbo’s been doing better with the Dream SMP situation back in New L’Manberg,” Ranboo says cheerfully. “Also, I have suddenly discovered my previously suppressed desire for uncontrolled violent tendencies towards people I don’t like.”

“Oh, good,” Tommy drawls, mimicking Techno’s monotone. “The curse has been passed on.”

Ranboo *has* been - well, to put it simply, more confident. And it’s not just a recent thing.

Somehow the development has been in progress since they first received Tubbo’s letters. He’s *changed* so much and clearly for the better.

The combined weight of it all slaps Tommy in the face like a wake-up shout from Wilbur. Or a wet and particularly pretty looking fish.

Would Tubbo look at him and think the same thing?

“What about actual names?” Wilbur asks, and Tommy quickly shelves that train of thought.

“Like what? A name similar to ones from the New L’Manberg area?” Phil asks. “Names like *Bella* or *Molly* or... *Clara* are pretty common around there.”

“That’s also boring,” Wilbur says.

“I think Clara is a good name,” Tommy grumbles.

“You think Clara and Clementine are good names for everything.” Wilbur rolls his eyes. “Does it ever get tiring?”

“Says the person who named a political party *POG* and their exiled rebellion *Pogtopia*,” Tommy retorts.

“Those were good names!”

“They really weren’t,” Phil says.

“I was just confused,” Ranboo admits. “Didn’t think such serious things named by *the* Wilbur Soot would be called... that. Tubbo had to reassure me Quackity wasn’t pulling a prank when he first explained New L’Manberg’s past to me.”

“I ha-” Wilbur cuts himself off, and gives them a look that Tommy thinks holds far too many traces of desperate fondness to be exasperated. “What about... *Pommes de Terre*?”

Tommy sighs. He wonders why Techno isn’t joining in, but then the sound of a nailing hammer grows louder.

“First of all, why would you name a ship after a brand of potato-based wine? After you told me to not buy wine?” He pauses, and adds, “also, terre literally fucking means earth.”

“It’ll be funny,” Wilbur protests.

“Let’s name it something like *Drug Dealer*,” Ranboo suggests, clearly trying and failing to keep his face straight.

There’s a moment where Tommy and Wilbur, both usually so quick to respond, are completely silent. The others clearly pick up that there’s some implication there, some rise of consideration and agreement, and so they keep quiet.

“*The Camarvan*,” Tommy finally says. Was his voice wavering when he did so? Fucking gods, he hopes not.

“Yeah,” Wilbur whispers. “That.”

No one argues. Later, Techno brings down a small bucket of silver paint to the newly replaced and reinforced flanks of the ship, and paints on either side across in calligraphy just as fancy as Wilbur’s - *The Camarvan* - shiny and new and deliberate as the process of creating drugs.

~\*~

With the building all done back home, and so much to do down at the beaches and harbors and Sanctuary proper nowadays, it’s rather inevitable they bring Clementine down eventually.

She’s nearly five months old now, a giant fluff of fur that refuses to stay still. Phil holds her gently in his arms during the flight down, grip firm despite the nervous whining and pawing, and then proceeds to dump her in Tommy’s arms the moment they land in the forest around Sanctuary that now feels almost like a daily routine to stop at.

“Remember that bet we made like... weeks ago?” Wilbur asks as him, Tommy, and Ranboo walk the solid, stone-cut path to the oceans.

“That Clementine would refuse to go in the water?” Ranboo asks.

Wilbur smiles, and fluffs Clementine’s head. She licks his fingers in response.

It’s cloudy today, the winds slightly faster than usual, the ocean’s salty tang more insistent on pricking his eyes. But his steps are steady and light enough. Nothing hurts in his muscles, and the pain in his chest, ever present, has been dulled since breakfast this morning.

He wants to run, today. Run and dive through the ocean like he and Techno used to do while Tommy had hovered nearby, mostly dry, occasionally dipping his feet in the water like it might take a bite out of him any second.

Nowadays Tommy is, of course, much better equipped for the water. And the sky. And the land.

That’s fine, though. That’s great, actually - he’s much rather it be Tommy able to do that, and the rest of his family, than him. Wilbur wouldn’t be able to make much use of functional legs even if they had healed fully.

*He wouldn’t be dragging them down as far, though.*

Unbidden, a small frown shows itself - one Wilbur quickly pushes away. His eyes dart to his side, to make sure Tommy didn’t see it - but no, he’s chatting about something with Ranboo, the words rolling over Wilbur’s mind like ocean waves even now, incomprehensible.

That’s fine.

Anyway, Wilbur knows Phil doesn’t like that sort of thought - about his disability dragging them down. None of his family do. And he doesn’t. Because he can be fine. Feel fine - better.

Or something like that.

Wilbur thinks he’s feeling better. It’s a beautiful day. He wishes he could run and kick sand at the crabs and kneel to claw his fingers through the tidal pools in search for the tiny enclaves of life, without the fear of tripping over and having to waste Tommy or Ranboo’s time calling for them to help him up again.

But he can’t.

Again. That’s perfectly fine. He has everything else from before. He has more than he’s ever had, actually, and certainly more than what he deserves.

The winds whisper *we’ll carry you* and the ocean whispers *you can still float, can’t you?* The forces pull his being back and forth like a pendulum, center nestled deep within his head.

It’s not calming, but it’s manageable and better than the haze he used to lose himself in (and still occasionally does). It’s a better stand in for his internal revolutions than what came before, all fire and destruction.

Today is a good day.

He should show it.

“Ranboo,” he says as they reach the waters’ edges, its almost-static flooding his mind in rhythm. He taps his cane into the water, and it comes back slightly darker on the already near-black varnish.

“You’re about to owe me 10 gold pieces.”

Clementine wriggles in Tommy’s arms, in no discernable direction.

Tommy grins, glances between them - and then lets go.

~\*~

Ranboo does, in fact, end up handing 10 gold pieces to a quietly smiling Wilbur.

Tommy thinks he probably ended up with the worst deal out of this arrangement, however, because when Clementine is done with her swim she rushes straight back into his arms with showers of seawater and a lobster still scuttering in her mouth.

And after that little debacle is sorted out, Tommy begins his own dive into the ocean. This time with the enchanted cloak *on*.

Turns out, it’s light enough to keep Tommy afloat even if he bunches into a tiny ball within it and doesn’t move a muscle.

And oh, there are *so* many possibilities with that. Phil may be able to torpedo through the water, but Tommy - Tommy now has his own tricks.

Doesn’t fix the jab of pain he felt from the lobster’s claws, though. Stupid fucking crustacean.

~\*~

“What are your property laws around here?”

Scott seems taken aback by the question, which has Phil cheering a mildly smug feeling of victory.

“Property laws?”

“Well, let’s answer this first - where would you say the borders of Sanctuary stops?”

Scott puts down his book on... *lobster cuisine*? And taps the table. His cup of coffee, Phil notes, is nearly empty, despite how he had witnessed him enter the café only five minutes ago.

“Where we want them to stop,” he finally says. “There’s no other town for almost a hundred leagues, and we have the space in this cove to expand five times larger if we want.”

He pauses, and adds, “the population’s been stable for the past hundred years or so, though, which is about how long we’ve been here. So unless something major happens, you don’t need to worry about us knocking on your home for taxes or anything.”

“Good,” Phil says easily. “Because we wouldn’t have paid any anyway, and it’s so awfully easy to fall off those cliffs if you don’t have wings.”

“I know,” Scott says dryly. “From - ah - somewhat personal experience.”

Phil reminds himself to cut back on the subtle threats, especially towards Scott. He *is* the one who had rescued and taken care of Wilbur after his... suicide attempt, after all.

Old habits die hard, however. This isn’t the first time he’s slipped.



At least, it's happening less frequently.

"Thanks for that," he says. It's not the first time he's expressed the sentiment, and once again, Scott waves it off.

"You guys have brought more than enough business to this place to make up for it, so we're even," he says. "Though, Pete was bemoaning how Techno's newest parkour time is just 9 seconds away from his. At this rate he might even break it, which would probably be the most monumental thing to happen in Sanctuary since it was first founded."

"Ah, yes. You said Sanctuary is only around a hundred years old?"

"This particular settlement, anyway," Scott nods. "According to my grandma, who heard it from her grandma, most of us are descended from a thousand refugees fleeing warring nations in the west. When they got here the place was devoid of people, but they found plenty of old house foundations and iron tools to suggest it wasn't always this way."

"Bit of an odd place to settle," Phil notes. "There's a lot of environmental magic around here. The mobs spawn in several times the quantity they usually do."

"There are higher spawn rates, yes," Scott says. "They do come with more weapons and armor than usual, though - a lot of what we trade to merchant ships is molten gold and iron, from the equipment zombies and skeletons come with. The ones with particularly good enchantments our blacksmiths usually fix up a bit and sell as is."

"I had wondered where you were getting all your iron and gold from, given the lack of mines around here."

Scott grins.

"Why do you think such a tiny town like ours has so many ships stopping by? We have teams of hunters that go out to slay and collect loot most nights - it's enough gold and iron to rival the production of specialized mining towns ten times our population." Scott sounds satisfied, in that way a participant of this system tends to be. "It's dangerous, but we've also had a hundred years to prepare our town defenses."

"I have noticed that as well," Phil says. It's his turn to raise eyebrows. "The monster repulsion spells around here are rather hard to miss."

"Figures you'd have noticed them," Scott mutters. He rolls his eyes. "Try to keep quiet, will you? Most of the citizens don't know the specifics, given how easy it is to disturb the spell - they take me enough work to maintain as it is, by the way, so don't ask for an extension to your place."

"Oh, we have our own ways of dealing with the monster problem," Phil says lightly. "It's just rather interesting to me, since most places with so much latent magic would normally be devoid of human or hybrid settlement."

"There are exceptions to everything," Scott shrugs, looking once again far too pleased with himself. "As I've explained, we've found ways around our problems. And what may be a problem for some might be a boon for others."

He gazes focuses, sharper. Phil gives a tilt of his head. It's the closest thing he'll give to admission, at least here.

Latent magic draws together other latent magic, condensing like droplets of morning dew on leaves.

“I have a bit of...” Phil smiles, teeth sharp. Techno got his demeanor from somewhere, after all. “A bit of an affinity for magic, you could say. The environment around here had been a fine rest stop a few times before, so you could imagine my surprise when I came back for the first time in a few hundred years to find people had, finally, successfully settled here.”

“We work with what we have,” Scott nods. “You understand.”

He does.

Phil is in a better position to protect those he loves, here. The magic isn't quite that of the End, cold void of death and nothingness enveloping, but it's close enough to tug on his instincts nonetheless. He's young by some standards, but still old enough to shrug off the more nagging effects like a cloak.

His sons, however - well, Techno tries so hard to handle himself. He usually succeeds. Phil wants to trust him. Point is, they *know*. He knows.

And as far as any of them have learned, Wilbur is human. Perhaps a bit strange, raised by Phil for so long, smothered in magic from him and his surroundings, but still very much human.

Tommy, on the other hand...

There's a reason they're having this conversation now. They'd always thought Tommy was a human as well - Phil had his suspicions when they first met, but nothing manifested in all those years.

Nothing's manifested now, at least discernably enough to pin down, but the faraway in his son's eyes as he had stared into the oceans, like he had once stared into the skies, bottomless and hungry for *something*...

It's not harmful by itself. It's the same reason Phil yearns for the skies, for the vast emptiness to carve invisible dances through.

But it's indicative of something more. And he dearly hopes that none of that *more* will hurt Tommy worse than anything already has.

~\*~

“How did you do that?” Techno asks.

Tommy, ironically, stumbles at the question. The ledge jutting out the mountainside they're on is small, just barely enough for the two of them to walk a few steps, so he should probably be a bit more concerned about that. But instead he continues to stumble, internally, over the question.

The question asking how *he*, *Tommy Innit*, did something. As if there would be value in his answer that *Technoblade* could glean.

He takes a while to process the idea. Mind scrabbling between *what the fuck, did Techno just ask me to teach him something?* and *how the fuck did I do what, exactly?* In the meantime, his foot swipes a stray pebble to the side. He watches it skip one, two, three times before taking into freefall from the cliffside.

That could have been him once, so easily. Tossed by wind and stone and gravity like a broken doll. Not anymore, though.

Not anymore.

“What?” Tommy finally responds. To his surprise and mild pride, he doesn’t stutter.

“Your landing is smooth,” Techno says. He taps the stone beneath them. They’re on a less vegetated area of the mountain - not even the one they live on, but another that borders Sanctuary. Flying practice means they’re near the very top, where the rocks are wrinkled and bald save for the occasional clump of weeds. Rather similar to how Tommy imagines Dream’s head to look like.

“Smooth as in...?” Tommy knows his landings are smooth. He lands just as he takes off nowadays, in one continuous motion, like an arc of water through the air.

*Like how Phil lands*, he realizes, for the first time consciously. The fact sinks with a warmth he’s not sure he’s ready to welcome just yet.

But... why not? The cloak is his, but was Phil’s gift. He wants the skies just as Phil does. And Phil is... Phil is his father. His dad.

The idea settles a little nicer in his chest.

“Not just smooth,” Techno adds, clearly wrapped in his own thoughts. “It’s... it’s *silent*.”

“Kinda hard to be silent if you’re not smooth,” Tommy says. “Basically the same thing, dumbass.”

“I - could you explain that?”

Explain... explain that? To Techno? With Tommy doing the explaining?

Techno’s not plying a joke, right? There’s no way he doesn’t understand, always going on and on about connections and metaphors and real world applications or whatever.

“Techno,” Tommy says, squinting his eyes. “Are you okay?”

“What?” Techno takes a step back, elytra flaring up. A hand catches the wall behind him. He looks...

He looks scared. It’s not - it’s not obvious, but at the same time it’s *too* obvious.

Tommy stills.

Techno doesn’t show fear. Techno doesn’t ask others to *teach* him things. Techno has always been the one doing the teaching, the experimenting, the learning by himself.

Since when did *Tommy* become the one with any life skills to present to him? When did this happen? Is this is dream?

Well, probably not. Though if it is, it’s a lot more pleasant of a dream than his usual ones, if really weird. So he’s not complaining.

“You don’t - you want *me* to teach you shit?” Tommy asks. “How would I help?”

“I - sorry,” Techno manages. He looks away, but Tommy thinks he catches something gleaming in his eyes. “I’m not - I didn’t meant to-”

“Techno?” Tommy asks. This is weird. This is beyond weird.

He hesitates, and then asks a question that, just a year ago, he never, ever would have even considered the possibility of asking.

“Techno, are you okay?”

“*I’m fine*,” Techno says. Too stiff, too even, too *commanding*, but Tommy knows better than to take that at face value.

*He wouldn’t have considered asking this question a year ago*, Tommy realizes again, the thought light as an inkprint impression and yet pressing down on his mind like a balloon that refuses to stop expanding. *He wouldn’t have considered the possibility that Techno might not be alright.*

“You - you’re looking a little tense there, Tech,” Tommy laughs, now all quiet and nervous. Damn it, he needs to pull himself together. The nickname slips out like a minnow, tiny and almost unnoticed.

“I’m fine,” Techno says. “Perfectly fine. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs are completely fulfilled for me-”

“You know, I have no fucking clue who Maslow is or what his hierarchy is about, but I once heard Wilbur say it’s all complete bullshit,” Tommy says. He takes a shot in the dark. “I also heard him say your insistence on violence being your language was complete bullshit.”

“I’m not - you’re not hurt, are you?”

“W-what?” Tommy frowns as Techno leans forward, peers at his face. “Why the sudden attention on me?”

He twists away from Techno’s reaching hand, too fast, heart thudding a beat too loudly.

They both freeze. Techno looks as if Tommy had just stabbed a sword in his chest.

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, that’s not how any of this goes.

Tommy finds it in himself to push through after a few moments, however, forcing a continuation.

“Techno, I’m fine. If I wasn’t I’d be pissing off the whole world with my screaming, trust me.”

“That’s good,” Techno says. He sounds *faint*, alarmingly, like he’s seconds away from passing out.

*The fuck?* Tommy is really, really not prepared for this.

“I - I’m glad.” Techno clears his throat, though it doesn’t sound that successful. More like whatever was lodged in there has only been twisted into an even more uncomfortable angle.

“Uhh...” Tommy hangs his mouth open, but there’s really not much he knows to say. He wonders if he should step closer, as a warm presence. Wilbur finds it easier to relax like that.

Techno doesn’t seem like the type to appreciate such a thing, though, at least now. He used to be a lot less adverse to it back during their childhood days.

“I’m sorry,” Techno adds.

Well, that came out of nowhere. Again. Tommy frowns.

“Dude, this is - okay, what are you sorry for?” he asks.

Techno blinks.

“I’m sorry,” he says again, something broken in his throat.

Then, abruptly, like an arrow tearing - he turns and *dives off the cliff*.

His elytra had been flared. But - but...

*There’s no way flying at an angle that steep is safe*, is Tommy’s first thought.

It takes a few seconds for the static stuttering of his mind to stop, but when it finally clears enough he realizes - in slow paces - his situation.

Techno is nowhere to be seen. Not only that-

Techno is acting weird, and he suddenly dived off a cliff at an unsafe angle and he was moving so fast and they’re nearly at the very fucking top of the mountain and he was *clearly not thinking straight when he dove off said fucking mountain*.

His breath catches, traitorously unresponsive.

Tommy’s next thought, just before he finds his own legs and arms and cloak moving in tandem, is-

*I think I fucked up.*

## Chapter End Notes

and you all thought the cliffhangers were over :D

# and it's not a pride, the weight of my crown

## Chapter Notes

[discord](#) to get pings for updates/discuss stuff!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The panic doesn't set in until Tommy flies several laps up and down the mountainside and doesn't see a single flash of pink, beyond some wildflowers that don't even have the decency to be trampled or something so he knows Techno's walked through them.

Though, it's more accurate to say that Tommy doesn't *let* the panic set in until then. It's been an insidious force building within, gathering its force like a tsunami since Techno kept repeating "I'm sorry" just before his impromptu dive *off the fucking cliff that bastard Tommy is going to skin him alive when he finds him*.

And there's no way Techno's... anything but fine. No way. He's fucking Technoblade, and he can handle himself, and of all the things that would hurt him it can't possibly be a little dive off a cliff. Even if that dive, the more Tommy thinks about it, was *stupidly* steep and *fast* and *uncharted* and *exactly* the kind of foolish, idiotic thing Phil's warned him against doing-

He's running out of rockets by the time he finally begins to shout.

"Techno!" Tommy yells, clinging to another cliffside on another ledge, one of so many. "Techno-fucking-blade! Get back here!"

Screw anonymity and keeping a lower profile and Sanctuary's people overhearing, *he can't fucking find Techno*.

*Fuck.*

This - this is fine. This has to be fine. Techno's fine.

Tommy wipes a hand against his face, slick with sweat and - and *tears*.

Fucking gods, he's crying. He can't cry right now. He doesn't have the time to cry right now. Also, tears make his already sweating hands even slipperier, and that's exactly the kind of not-ideal thing Techno would scold him about.

Tommy heaves another breath and shoves the looming wall of dread back into the abyss it came from.

*And fucking stay there*, he thinks viciously as he calls Techno's name yet again.

It takes ten minutes of searching.

Tommy's made his way into the forests creeping up the mountainside, all dark green and rustling with secrets millennia old. He's on a tree, tall and gnarled with age, but still standing against the current of

death. He's clinging to a branch like he once clung to the curve of Phil's wings, in what feels like forever ago.

And then, Techno is beside him. On the same tree. A branch across, blue shirt in tatters, a section of hair shorn off close to the root like a knife had been cleaved straight through it. It's close enough to the scalp that he can clearly see slightly pink skin. The rest of his hair looks like it's been whipped through a dust storm and then dragged through a hawthorn bush for good measure.

Tommy blinks once, twice, taking in the shuddering wincing in Techno's expression.

"What the fuck happened to you hair?"

Well. Never let it be said Tommy's terrible at reunions.

"Shut up," Techno mutters. "I spent 15 minutes untangling as much as I could before cutting the rest off because I heard your screaming."

"I wasn't *screaming*, bitch--"

Tommy falls silent as he watches Techno smooth out his hair. It's so clearly tangled with sticks and brush and gravel that it'll take hours to sort out.

Techno *hates* his hair being messed up, avoids cutting or dirtying it to a religious level of zeal. On the battlefield he takes such great pains to make sure the only thing that ever stains it is blood that Wilbur jokes, whenever rumors of Techno drinking blood to sustain himself are brought up, that his hair might as well be the icebox storage with how pristinely its colors are kept to pink and crimson.

"You look like you're balding," Tommy finally says.

"*Thank you* for the *astute observation*," Techno huffs, slinging a newly-groomed section behind his shoulder like thin ribbons. "Now, what happened?"

That's when the carriage of all the previous panic Tommy had sent rolling off into the hills suddenly pulls back up to him, all fucking smug.

"*What* - what do you *mean*, what happened?" Tommy splutters, breath rate sprinting into a full gallop again. "You - *you're* the one who just *divebombed* off that cliff for no fucking reason, Mr. *What Happened?*"

Techno gives him a strange look, almost confused. Except no, how could he possibly be *confused*? Tommy is the only one who has a right to be confused here.

"I - I heard you screaming my name," Techno says, like Tommy had been the one to endanger his own life like a fucking idiot. "So... *are* you hurt?"

*What?*

He slides onto Tommy's branch with ease and begins running his eyes over him as if to check.

"You - you-" Tommy grabs the hand about to brush aside a twig in his cloak hood. "You fucking *idiot*."

Techno stares at the hand on his wrist with a blank look of bewilderment, like it's suddenly turned pink and polka-dotted without warning.

“*You*,” Tommy growls, raising a hand to jab his other finger at Techno, “were the one who jumped off that cliff and fell until I *couldn’t fucking see you*. So, you know, it would be great if I could go *a single year* without one of my brothers trying to off themselves-”

His voice strangles into a quiet, dull croak at that last part.

*Fuck*. He thought he’s gotten over that. But now his chest is heaving and his hands are shaking like they’re in the middle of the winter cold and his heart rate is probably fast enough to win a race against Dream.

Techno continues to stare at the hand on his wrist like it’s the most baffling thing in the world, but his slowly opening mouth holds dawning horror.

“Tommy,” he says. “I didn’t - I wasn’t - I wasn’t trying to hurt myself or - or anythin’. I just panicked a bit, y’know, as you do-”

“And you thought *diving off a cliff* and - and *leaving me* was-”

Tommy turns away and resists the urge to puke out his breakfast, stuttery heaves in the shape of suppressed sobs that are somehow worsening.

“I have an elytra-”

“*And you weren’t opening it enough!*” Tommy yells back, throwing his hands up. “That wasn’t the way to use an elytra at all! You could have fucking *broken your neck!*” He wrenches his hand out of Techno’s grip, surprisingly easily, and scooches back on the branch.

A horrible expression of guilt overtakes Techno’s face.

Tommy immediately wishes he had just stayed where he was.

“You - I - why did you *do that?* ” he whispers.

“I panicked,” Techno repeats. He draws his outstretched hand back to his chest, slowly, the other reaching up to caress it.

He’s shaking too, Tommy realizes. Techno is shaking too. Mostly his hands.

“Panic about what? You’re the one who asked me the question.”

“I’m sorry,” Techno says, again.

This is starting to get really fucking frustrating.

“*About what?*” Tommy asks. This time he reaches forward and yanks on Techno’s hand, tugging them close. Techno freezes. “Come on, Techno, please answer the fucking question-”

“You - I asked you to - to explain the elytra landin’,” Techno says, but he sounds uncertain now.

Well, at least he hasn’t gone completely off the deep end, because that is the weirdest reason to be sorry Tommy has ever heard. And he’s the closest person *Ranboo* has to a friend around here.

“Yeah...?” Tommy settles on.



“And you... well, I guess it’s not really my place to be askin’ those sorts of questions,” Techno finishes under his breath.

Tommy blinks.

*What?*

Techno’s question - Tommy had deflected because he thought there wasn’t any way Techno would have asked them seriously - because Techno would already know something like that. After all, he’s the one who has spent the most time around Phil, has...

But that’s not really a logical train of thought to take, is it? It is, as Wilbur would say, “full of fallacies.”

Why did he - was Techno really trying to get a genuine answer out of Tommy? Because he actually didn’t know, and wanted to learn?

But Techno’s never, *ever* asked for help on something like that before. It’s always been sarcasm and scoffing, because *The Blade* can do anything-

*“I’ve always been just The Blade to you! A weapon! Am I just - just someone to be used like that? Is that all anyone sees me as?”*

Tommy’s breath hitches.

Techno is... was he asking for someone to tell him he wasn’t just a weapon?

No one had given him an answer that day.

But - but Techno has never asked for - and yeah, they were all just a *little* distracted by the terrorism-

Before the 16th, Tommy never asked for the sort of help he has now either.

What was it Wilbur said, about people changing? Or trying to change, the result so dependent on the reception of those around them?

“Tommy?” Techno’s voice breaks the curtain, hesitant.

“I’m having a bit of a crisis here, Techno,” Tommy says almost breathlessly, throat seizing. “So if you could be quiet for, like, just another minute - that would be great.”

Techno, to his credit, waits another 5 minutes for Tommy’s breathing to get back onto a manageable level before speaking again.

“I think we should go back home,” he says. “My hair is an atrocious mess.”

“Yeah,” Tommy says. “It’s just - really fucking sad to look at.” He unclips the remaining fireworks on his belt and readies his cloak. Techno does the same with his elytra.

Taking off isn’t ideal in the middle of a tree, but they make do. One thing’s for sure, though - Tommy’s not going to let this be the last of this conversation, no matter how much Techno may wish that is the case.

Tommy is being weird.

Actually, screw that, *everyone* is being weird.

After they got home after... *that* embarrassing little debacle, Techno had resolved to never bring it up again.

So he combed out of his hair all the little twigs and leaves and dirt and occasional woodlice or spider or, in one particularly stubborn snag, a small centipede, and then spent an hour washing it in the nearby stream before Tommy could bring up any questions about how he managed to screw up a landing so badly right *after* having a panic attack over asking how to land.

This has gone beyond embarrassing little debacle, actually. Techno's not sure he can show his face around Tommy after this.

It's a few hours past noon by the time his hair is dripping wet and brushed and *clean* again, which means it's the perfect time for a little nap, preferably to until the next morning.

Unfortunately, Tommy had refused to let the matter go. And sure, Techno can see that it may have been a little weird from his perspective (though it was a lot weirder from his own, in his humble opinion), but there's a resolute determination to Tommy's gaze that seems to pin him down.

*Phil used to do that*, he thinks as Tommy drags him from the doorway of his room back into the living area, pillow in hand and all. *I couldn't escape his looks when he didn't want me to either.*

Tommy has been picking up things so quickly. A brief warmth of pride flashes in Techno's chest.

Also, thankfully, Wilbur and Phil aren't in the house right now. That would have made things even more awkward.

"What's so important you have to pull me from my beauty sleep?" Techno asks as Tommy drags them to the couch and seats them down together. He tries to not flinch when an arm brushes against his. "My hair won't regrow without proper rest, you know."

He flings his fingers through the locks for good measure, though he knows the effect is rather dampened by the giant chunk missing from the front, hastily sliced - almost torn, really - from the root the moment after he heard Tommy scream.

"Are you really still doing this?" Tommy groans.

"Doing what?"

Techno knows he's stalling. Stalling is something he does quite well, if he does say so himself. He's won a lot of battles by knowing when to stall.

He's not sure what he's stalling *for*, or *why* he wants to keep whatever's about to happen back, but he has the distinct feeling he won't like what's about to come out of Tommy's mouth next.

He's had a few hours to prepare himself mentally, however. So the frantic beating he feels in his chest has to be his imagination. He's read a lot of stories with phantom beating hearts that shouldn't be beating.

Wait, his heart *should* be beating. If it's not, that would be rather concerning.

Or maybe not. Normal piglins turn into zombified ones when they enter the Overworld. He's only half - maybe not even half, but some weird mix like one-third or something, since apparently that's possible.

Evidently, it's enough to spare him the transition. Unless it's something that just happens very, very slowly for the likes of him, in which case his heart suddenly stopping and turning into a state of "shouldn't be beating" would make quite a significant amount of sense.

"Techno."

Techno starts as two hands begin shaking him, one on each shoulder. They burn, almost, just as grabbing Tommy's wrist had - which is weird, because he's pretty sure physical contact hadn't really burned for him before, those few times he had felt it. Or maybe he had just been ignoring the feeling back then - stalling the feeling.

Certainly a possibility. And hey, he's even admitting to it! Character growth!

It's not an actual burn, though. He had checked his hand meticulously enough to come to that conclusion. It just felt like... felt like-

"Techno!"

"What?" Techno asks automatically.

"Fucking gods, you are - ugh. I feel like I'm talking to a magic tree or something. All cryptic and silent and shit." Tommy rubs a hand on his cheek, frowning.

"So..." Techno lets the word linger.

In his defense, *Tommy* had been the one to start this. Not him.

"Okay, so - why did you freak out over asking me about landing smoothly?" Tommy asks.

Techno blinks.

"I - I shouldn't have?" he asks. Uncertainty creeps into the response, as it usually does.

Techno doesn't know, really, beyond that he had a looming sense of dread *before* asking Tommy the question and had foolishly pushed through it to do so anyway, and that the feeling of dread had blossomed into full on panic at Tommy's stammering, confused response.

So, yeah. Asking other people for that sort of thing clearly doesn't have much hope of working out, if that's how *Tommy* of all people reacted.

Why was Techno so freaked out by it, though? He had even expected some reaction like it, had mentally prepared himself back then too, so... why?

"That's... not an answer," Tommy says.

"It's the only answer I have," Techno says.

That, at least, is truthful.

He hasn't thought this out very well at all, has he? But he's Technoblade - he doesn't *receive* answers. He receives blood.

Except when he doesn't, apparently. What has he been doing for the past nearly-year? The anniversary of November 16th is two months away. He hasn't seen violence in a *long* while and somehow, it hasn't snuck up on him yet, despite what he told Ranboo a while back.

"So you think-" Tommy's face scrunches.

"Look, I'm not sure what you're getting at," Techno begins. He feels like something's being lost in translation here. "But how I see it, I asked you how you land smoothly because you do it a lot better than me, and - I guess I shouldn't have? Like, it's my responsibility to figure that out, not yours to teach me. So you got confused about why I was havin' you do that work, which is fair, and I'm sorry about that - and you know, I had a little crisis myself there about what I did, but we're all fine now. So really, this whole added bonus content of me sittin' here with you - it's nice, but can we talk about Phil's knittin' or somethin' now? What an old man, am I right, taking up *knittin'* of all hobbies."

"Fuck, you're more nervous than *me*," is what Tommy says in response, eyes wide. "I didn't think that was possible."

Techno frowns.

"I feel like you're missing the point here."

"No - *you're* missing the point here." Tommy leans forward, jabbing his finger at him again. "Techno - you know you're allowed to ask for help on things, right? Like, that's kind of the point of us all being here? And what you keep telling Wilbur and me applies to you too."

Techno takes a moment to repower his brain, which somehow mysteriously shut down when Tommy said the word "help".

"I'm - but that's not a thing I should do," he says, gathering himself.

Tommy has never been more unimpressed in his life, Techno can tell.

Uhh... he needs to elaborate on the argument. Define, explain, elaborate.

"I'm the one in the strongest position of power around here," he begins. "Well, except Phil. But anyway, I'm supposed to be the one supportin' everythin', you know? Not the other way around. You shouldn't have to - to help me with things I should know. 'Cause I can figure that out by myself."

That elaboration only draws out a long suffering sigh from Tommy, who is looking increasingly like Wilbur when he's rebuking arguments.

Which Techno thinks is mildly unfair, actually. That wasn't academic paper levels of smoothness, obviously, but he thought he made a good point.

"First of all," Tommy begins, now *definitely* channeling his inner Wilbur.

*Oh dear*, Techno thinks. He wishes he has another justification to stall right now, but he's cut off Tommy too many times to ever justify doing it again.

"First of all, Techno, that is personally insulting to me. I am very hurt by your - your *implication* that I am not as able to figure things out as you, or whatever shitty fucking explanation you just tried to feed

me.”

“I’m not saying that,” Techno protests. “But I’m - older. And I’m supposed to help you, especially after the whole Pogtopia thing-”

“Secondly,” Tommy drones on. “Not asking for help is how Wilbur ended up with his leg.”

Techno winces.

He wants to call Tommy out for cheap tactics, but - he turns the claim this way and that and can’t find a single nick on its infuriatingly shiny surface.

He had been the one who constantly cornered Wilbur demanding he “open up” or whatever during those first few weeks. He hadn’t succeeded then.

The irony here is not lost on him.

But history is supposed to repeat itself with nations and wars and cultures and trade and - just - *not* them. Their little family of four.

“I-” Techno breaks off, bites his lip.

“You *know* I’m right,” Tommy says, eyes narrowed. “Stop being such a fucking hypocrite, gods.”

“How’s Techno being a hypocrite?” a new voice asks.

Oh, great. Just when Techno thought things couldn’t get any worse.

Wilbur is moving through the doorway, gait more tired than usual, but there’s a satisfied grip to the way he moves with his cane that fades when he spots Techno and Tommy together on the couch, half-glaring at each other.

Phil glides in as well, and closes the door with a click.

“Techno’s refusing to admit he needs help,” Tommy says.

“I don’t-”

“Yeah, you do.” Wilbur says without hesitation. Then he frowns.

Great. Just great. They’re all jumping on the bandwagon.

He moves over to sit on Techno’s other side on the large couch, and Phil takes the smaller one nearby.

A protest flares and dies on Techno’s tongue when Wilbur leans his head against his shoulder, arms moving to loosely hang over him.

“That fact that you’re denying you need help is a warning,” Wilbur yawns. “No one never not needs help, Techno, and you’ve got... a lot of problems.”

His scowl somehow deepens. “Too many, actually, now that I think about it. Fuck, how did we get here again?”

“It’s nothing any of you need to worry about,” Techno says, trying his best to express his exasperation. He tries to get up. “I’m going to go take my nap now-”

“Techno,” Phil says. The weight of his name forces Techno back into his seat, sinking like an anchor. Wilbur promptly wraps his arms even tighter around his shoulders, and Tommy shifts closer as well.

The bastards.

“I am *fine*,” Techno grits out. “I *promise* I won’t go throwing myself off cliffs before readying my elytra again-”

“You did *what*? ” Phil and Wilbur yell at the same time, Wilbur’s voice especially like it’s a burst bubble spilling water within his head.

Techno winces, again.

“My ears, guys. I need them-”

“*Techno*,” Phil says, sounding aghast.

“Hah! That was my reaction too!” Tommy says triumphantly.

“It wasn’t - it wasn’t *like that*,” Techno protests, trying and failing to pry Wilbur’s now *extremely* tight grip from his shoulders. He’s latched on tight like a barnacle, though. From the near maniacal look on his brother’s expression it seems like he’d rather break his own fingers than let go, so after a few more seconds Techno gives up trying.

“I just - there was just a *slight* bit of panic, and I reasoned it best to remove myself from the situation for a few moments, and the cliff was *right there*. I had an elytra on and everything, so I landed just fine.”

“Fine enough you *only* needed to cut off your fucking hair to untangle yourself from whatever situation you landed in,” Tommy snorts.

“Oh. I had wondered why you look like Clementine’s new chew toy.” Wilbur reaches up and pokes the roughly shaved patch, short enough to press against skin. Techno, somehow, couldn’t bring himself to tell him off.

“You had to *cut off your hair*? ” Phil asks. He sounds almost alarmed now.

They all know the significance of that. Nothing is as important to Techno as his perceived image, after all - his indomitable reputation.

Well, nothing except the idiots around him right now, presumably.

“It’s not like I’m gonna be showing it around,” Techno tries to dismiss, ignoring how much pain the idea of walking around looking like this for the next few months brings him. Maybe now’s a good time to try some new hairstyles. “It’s Tommy’s fault anyway, he’s the one who kept screaming my name.”

“‘Cause I was *trying* to make sure you weren’t *fucking dead* or bleeding out in a river or something,” Tommy snaps.

Techno tugs the golden necklace he has up and flashes the totem held at the end.

“I *also* had healing potions on me,” he says. “*And* it’s late summer - early fall. Or whatever. Point is, there wasn’t a blizzard to give me hypothermia either, so I would have been *fine*. You’re all overreactin’.”

“It’s not - you-” Tommy exhales, long and slow and furious still.

“Techno,” Phil says, clearly pained. “We care about your safety. Just because you’re - you think you can handle things alone doesn’t mean you should.”

“Well - uh - you all-” Techno scowls. There’s not much in the way of argument against *that*.

So logically, he shouldn’t be arguing against it at all, but something about the idea just sits so *wrong* with him. That he would need *help*. That if he didn’t ask for help he would in reality be *weaker*.

“It’s - I mean, Tommy and Wilbur are the ones who got the worst end of Potopia, not me,” he says. “I came out with barely a scratch, really-”

Tommy huffs. “And I guess that’s why you complied with Schlatt’s order to execute Tubbo-”

“I’m *sorry*,” Techno says, and he can’t even bring himself to be stiff about it. He thinks he just sounds... miserable, really. It’s quite pathetic. “I’m - if you really want I’ll go back to New L’Manberg and kill Dream for Tubbo or something, and help him make sure his government isn’t in danger of falling apart-”

“That’s not what I’m saying,” Tommy snaps. “I - I *know* you’re sorry about what you did to Tubbo and me, and I *know* you’re willing to make amends and we’ve agreed to not get on each other’s throats about it, and yes, I’m still mad about that, but - but what about *you*? ”

“What *about* me?”

Gods, this conversation has gotten way out of control. Techno should have tried harder to break out of Tommy’s grip.

“You clearly weren’t in your right mind when Schlatt put you in the spotlight at the festival,” Wilbur says.

“I tried to aim it to be non-lethal-”

“But you looked - you were *scared*,” Wilbur presses. “No one else could see it, but me and Tommy could. You wouldn’t have done it if there hadn’t been all those people believing you would. If you had more time.”

But he did anyway. It’s what happened that matter, in the end, and Tubbo will never see from that eye or walk normally again. Techno had to see his scarred face and hobbling figure around Pogtopia for the next few months - he would know.

“I know I’m weak to peer pressure,” he sighs. “I’ll - I’ll try my best to work on that, make sure I don’t make another mistake like that again, I promise-”

“That’s great, but the point is, you - *we* - let it get that bad in the first place. There’s no way that was the first time people used your reputation to pressure you into doing something you didn’t want to,” Wilbur.

“That’s not a valid excuse for what happened at the festival, by the way,” Tommy adds. His lips press thinly. “But - but Wil has a point too. You didn’t - I didn’t believe you would do it, so I was too late to pearl in and stop you. I didn’t realize how much you’d changed. What you’d experienced in the time we were all apart.”

Great, now Phil has that awful look of guilt on his face, like it’s a fault of his parenting again somehow.

“I was the one who cultivated that reputation,” Techno says. “It’s - it’s my fault I got there in the first place-”

“You were fighting real battles by the time you were 14,” Phil says, strained “I let you because I thought you were skilled enough to keep yourself safe.”

“I *was*! Only one or two near death experiences on the battlefield, really-”

“You were physically, yes but - I didn’t - I didn’t think about how your reputation might have affected your self-esteem.” Phil stands up, takes a few steps closer. Techno feels Wilbur relax his grip just a bit, fingers uncurling. “You were too young to understand how to handle all the rumors that followed you, how *awfully* everyone else treated you, so you leaned into it and thought that was what your purpose was, and I - I didn’t *do* anything about it because I didn’t see the problem then either.”

Techno opens his mouth, but the only thing he can muster is, “This is a bit of an awkward time to be psychoanalyzing my entire life.”

“Oh yeah?” Tommy challenges. “Name a better time.”

Upon Techno’s silence, he scoffs.

“Maybe it’s time you write a few self-motivating journal entries of your own,” Wilbur says.

“In the middle of my book draft?”

“Get a new journal. Or use mine. I write them between pages of music scores, so you have no excuse.”

Phil runs a hand through Techno’s hair. His eyes widen again when Techno fails to suppress the tightening of his hands into fists.

“Techno,” he says, drawing his hand away. Techno resists the urge to duck his head and chase after the feeling like an overeager hound. This house already has one of them, thankfully asleep right now. “First of all, Techno, I’m sorry. I’ve - I’ve really just been a terrible father to all three of you. And I shouldn’t have seen that promise as a reason to split my focus away.”

What promise? Techno frowns - and then picks it out from the depths of his memory.

“*You promise you’ll stay focused on Tommy and Wil?*”

“...yeah.”

Oh. Right. *That* promise.

Wilbur doesn’t know the specifics, but clearly he realizes what must have been agreed between them, because he scowls and buries his face in Techno’s neck again.



“You’re such a fucking idiot,” he mutters.

“Agreed,” Tommy adds.

Techno sighs.

“And second-” Phil says, wrapping a wing over Techno’s head. “Please ask for help when you need it. And if you don’t, we’ll give it to you anyway.”

“I’ll force-feed it down your throat,” Tommy says. “Don’t think I won’t. I already did it once to Wilbur.”

“I recall,” Wilbur grumbles.

“I’m really-” Techno breaks off. He has a feeling saying he’s “fine” again won’t make things any easier for him.

“You’re not fine,” Wilbur says. Too perceptive. “Anyway, sorry we’ve kept this for so long. Should have been paying more attention. You like the hugs, don’t you?”

Just when Techno thought this conversation couldn’t get worse.

“I-” he pries at Wilbur’s grip again. It’s strong, as always.

“Listen, I caught you giving me and Tommy the most tragic look the other morning when we hugged. And that was just because Tommy had felt like hugging me, not because his newest pet butterfly died or something,” Wilbur says.

“I’m... not opposed to the motion,” Techno finally relents.

Wilbur’s arms burn. He feels like he’s suffocating in them, but it’s... it’s so easy to get lost in it as well. To feel as though nothing about his skills or purpose or reputation matters within the warmth. If Techno closes his eyes, he could just barely trick himself into thinking he doesn’t want to leave.

He keeps his eyes open.

Wilbur grins, and shifts a bit - Techno realizes too late it’s so Tommy can pile himself on top of him as well.

“Guys, I also - I also need to breathe,” Techno grumbles. And then there’s feathers running through his hair again.

Great.

“Promise us you’ll ask for help when you need it,” Phil says, sounding entirely too unconcerned for Techno’s impending doom from suffocation.

“Promise,” Techno wheezes.

“Also that you’ll tell us if you have any doubts about what you think we’re thinking,” Wilbur says. “Even if it’s just little things, like wanting hugs. It’s - it’s always better safe than sorry, Techno. Or I’ll corner you and make you spill.”

Techno manages to throw a smirk in Wilbur’s direction.

“Learned from the best, huh?”

“Learned from your mis-” Wilbur winces, breaking off, but then continues. “Learned quite a lot from you, of course. How the tables have turned.”

Tommy squeezes a bit tighter.

“Okay! Fine! Promise - all of that!”

He feels lightheaded. Ironically, he could actually use a nap now. A nap sounds very nice.

Gods, he hopes they won’t use that promise against him for something dumb. They probably will.

This is not an ideal situation he’s signed himself up for.

Though, maybe if he continues to receive hugs, this whole thing might have been a net positive after all.

~\*~

“No - you keep the elytra *up* when your feet touch the ground. Stop closing it so early!”

“But then I skid further!”

“Just dig your heels in and stop stumbling so much!”

“Phil, Tommy’s being nonsensical-”

“No, *you* just need to practice more.”

“...I hate you.”

## Chapter End Notes

i cant write touch starved techno being sad about being touch starved in the background anymore  
nooo slowly this story wrings the angst out of me this is so sad alexa play your new boyfriend

# look there, it's where the sun goes down

## Chapter Notes

[discord](#) to get pings for updates/discuss stuff!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Most places would consider the 14th of September still summer, but here in the north the leaves around them are holding beautiful dapples of yellow and orange.

Wilbur does not forget him and Techno's birthday, shared because they had been adopted nearly a year apart and average the dates to this day. He went to bed with the faint idea of it lingering in the remnants of his thoughts, and when he woke it returned like the memory of a distant dream.

So, it is their birthday. He wakes earlier than Techno, as usual. His dreams were calmer in his sleep last night - only a head bouncing of echoes and vague impressions of cold on his palms. Nothing aches beyond the usual, or runs rivets down his skin, which is good.

It's one of the days where it does take a few minutes for his body to slip out of the trance, however. Wilbur waits, as he has little other choice.

When feeling finally returns to his body, the numbness subsiding, he twists himself up. His journal is on the bedside table, quill crusted of black at the tip beside it.

He thinks he has enough words to muster something up this morning.

Wilbur takes another quill, not wanting to deal with flaking dry ink. He twists the lid off the inkpot, dips the quill, opens to the nearest blank page, and begins his entry.

*Entry 51*

*Hello, dear white blankness.*

*It has been a while since I wrote here again. I must admit I had found myself caught up in other matters - only some of which are of the family.*

*Today is my birthday. Mine and Techno's - we call each other twins so very often. I am, of course, the elder - both by actual age and adoption time. One of these claims is arguable, as neither of us know, beyond speculation and clumsy estimates, when exactly we were born.*

*Techno has long since given up the argument of who is physically older, however, so I claim my spot as eldest sibling with little fanfare.*

*Now I regret I had fought him so hard in our childhoods for the position. I am most certainly not deserving of it, especially compared in context to the vigor with which I wrestled all argument out of him. It is laughably pathetic, how much time I had spent driving the point instead of actually fulfilling the duties that come with it.*

*Even now, my family takes care of me far more than I do them. I try - I do, I sincerely hope I make a good effort to try. I clean up the house the best I can, check the crops and take care of the few animals we have. Collect eggs from the chicken coop - quite frankly, I think the chickens are more fond of me than they are of even Ranboo and Tommy, who love to feed them as an activity together and talk about all manner of things in the process. Though that is probably because Clementine is usually with them during this time, and the chickens are understandably worried they might get eaten.*

*I'm worried they might get eaten too sometimes, quite frankly.*

*Anyway, I make my daily walks down the mountains - Phil sometimes carries me down and guides me up it as well - and I keep a crossbow on hand in case of any monsters still lurking in the forests' shadowed treeline. Then I play with Clementine, give her treats and take her on walks around the house.*

*We go down to Sanctuary more often than not nowadays, and Clementine has gotten used to the trip often enough to bring her down with us most of the time as well. Tommy and Ranboo always check for any new ships, which are now arriving in increasing frequency.*

*Fall is the most popular time for trade to flow from the continent of Pyserne to Novixl, as the ocean currents and winds favor westward travel. I learned this when I was 16 and thought these lessons would be of importance.*

*They are, just not in the way I had ever imagined.*

*I should make some inquiries about any ships making their way bound for New L'Manberg, or the general area, during this time. The route is longer, but I know the plans Tommy and Ranboo have made. Well - not really plans, but they have a general timeframe for when they wish to see Tubbo again.*

*It is, after all, impossible to take the route we originally took. I can use the elytra well enough traveling up and down a mountain, but even then Phil is often there to steady me. My leg is an uneven weight distribution that I can't move well enough to steer with. A month of near continuous flying across the ocean is, unfortunately, entirely unfeasible for me.*

*Anyway, that is all in the future, though I suspect this second year will pass smoother than the first. We have a good thing running here. It's peaceful and quiet and calm and I have support.*

*Maybe some would ask me to reflect on the year. Certainly, much has changed. This time last year, I don't think I would have even remembered our birthday had Techno not mentioned it to me over our breakfast of roast potatoes. He had caught some salmon to go along with it too, and spiced it with herbs he smuggled out of Manberg with Niki. And - and he had made some soup with mushrooms, onions, kelp, and... I think goat liver?*

*Tommy made a comment about how fancy our meals were that night, I think.*

*I didn't notice the effort that went into it then. I just remember vaguely enjoying the meals more than usual.*

*Hindsight is 20/20, I suppose. I can appreciate it now. When Techno wakes, I should thank him. Better late than never, and all that. It was his birthday as much as it was mine, but only one of us had put any effort into it.*

*I do hope we don't have potatoes for breakfast today, though. No offense to my brother, but I am still rather sick of eating them.*

~\*~

When Wilbur arrives in the dining room area, bordered by the kitchen, what hits his nose is the smell of sizzling fish. In the trash bin he glimpses a scattering of fire-red scales, and peeking further below, indigo-blue ones, some still clinging to rags of translucent skin.

“Hi,” Tommy says. There’s yolk around his fingers. “Happy birthday.”

“Thanks,” Wilbur says.

The word slips out easily. He suppresses a smile.

By the time Techno drags himself down, breakfast is ready. It’s mostly just Wilbur and him’s favorites, and there’s a portion of potatoes for Techno and only Techno to eat, which the rest of them are all grateful for (even Phil, as he had been the one who bore the brunt of Techno’s potato obsession a few years back).

This fish is set in a glazy white sauce above spiraling pasta, and there is a joke to be made there that Wilbur dutifully refrains from doing.

“So,” Tommy says after they’re mostly done eating. “What are we doing? I already told Ranboo to be here early, by the way, and I had plans-”

“Uh - I’m fine with just a normal day,” Techno shrugs. “Mostly relaxing, I suppose.”

“Yeah,” Wilbur nods, chewing on a piece of apple candy. “Nothing too dramatic.”

Phil nods, clearly unsurprised. Neither of them had ever placed that much importance on their birthdays, beyond as either an excuse to do something ridiculous or, more seriously, to celebrate more the idea of Phil adopting them and giving them an actual home.

And after everything, all the clusterfuck situations he’s been in during his last few birthdays, Wilbur thinks the best way to go about things would be to just have some more peace and quiet.

“I guess I’ll check on the crops,” Techno yawns, moving to stand up. “We’re exempt from dishwashing duty today, right?”

“It was my day anyways.” Phil rolls his eyes.

“You wanna work today?” Tommy asks nearly the exact same time.

“Why not? It’s relaxing,” Techno says. “Would appreciate a little help though, ‘cause I want to enjoy some fresh air too.”

“Me too, actually,” Wilbur adds. “It’s not stupidly hot anymore, so I can actually enjoy the weather properly.”

“Imagine being put off by hot weather. Couldn’t be me.”

“I’ll join you all later,” Phil laughs, reaching over to pluck Wilbur’s sauce-stained plate. “Have fun.”

It's at this moment a loud bark sounds from Tommy's room, the sign that Clementine has woken up.

She darts over in a rain of blunted thudding a few moments later. When she sees them she leaps into Wilbur's lap, tongue moving to fly over his cheeks.

"Clementine!" Tommy calls. She stays on Wilbur, however, tail still wagging and paws warm. Wilbur runs a few fingers through her head and back, and boops his nose on hers with a smile.

"She's going to you more and more every morning now," Tommy huffs.

"She knows I give the best head scratches," Wilbur chuckles. But he wraps his hands beneath her and lifts her down to the floor again, after which she rushes over to begin kissing Tommy.

"See, there we go. This is where you should be, Clementine - hey! Ew, that's my eyeball you're licking!"

Wilbur bursts into laughter, chest light. Techno and Phil both smother their huffs.

It's a good day. One of the best days, actually. And it comes at a good time. The pendulum of his heart is steady and stills when it needs to.

He rises from his seat, left hand firm on his cane.

"I'm going to make sure none of the other fish have been traumatized by their brethren being killed," he says, making his way to the door.

"A new wife *would* be a good birthday present - ow! Clementine! You can't tug my eyelashes-"

With another laugh, Wilbur steps into the sunlight. From behind, he can hear Techno's footsteps joining him.

~\*~

They don't have many crops - there's only so much they could really want, after all - but they did plant a decently large variety.

It's actually more accurate to say *Techno* planted a decently large variety of crops. Tommy planted a lot of flowers. Phil built the crisscrossing trellis for beans and eggplants.

Wilbur mainly sticks to the task of inspecting them for pests or damage. Not that they've had a problem with them so far - there's a large ant colony that set up a nest somewhere close by early spring, and they chase off intruders well enough.

The leaves are fuzzy, or smooth, or wrinkled beneath his fingertips. Overall, though, it's a routine job. Something to do. Calm green to look at and rest his vision for a bit.

He walks - or, at least, hobbles along - breathes the fresh air, takes a drink of freshly collected rainwater or from the stream, with Clementine trying to trip him the entire time. Wilbur has a large, wishbone-shaped stick specifically to distract her when he needs it.

Phil picks more beans and eggplants from the trellises, and Techno harvests another pumpkin today. Tommy has been collecting pressed flowers in a book, so he scours around for more specimens and Wilbur, as always, keeps an eye out towards the wildflowers for anything new or interesting as well.

When he's finished inspecting the plants and Techno arrives on time with a watering can, he moves to the chicken coop and unlatches the door to slide it open. Two feathery bundles immediately spill onto the grass with indignant clucks, while three more quickly follow suit.

"Hello," he greets one of them - Crickett. She warbles back and begins attacking the seeds in his palm. Barely 10 seconds pass before Mack barrels over and tries to shove her out of the way, during which Wilbur throws the seeds onto the ground and reaches into his pouch to pull more out.

Feeding the chickens is always fun. They fight like siblings over the smallest of things - well, except Joy, who always seems content to snooze off in the grass - but miraculously, none of them have seriously hurt any others yet.

He makes sure they've all eaten their fill before making his way to the stable-cave area, where two horses are munching on the grass.

They haven't had use for these horses since they got here, and two of them fell to disease a few months ago. Phil has mentioned a few times how they might guide them back down the mountain soon and sell them.

None of them really have a complaint. Wilbur thinks they've all owned too many now dead horses to get attached to more of them. They are, after all, used more often like tools than pets.

A sad fate, really, to have life revolve around nothing but an owner who doesn't concern themselves with names. Though Techno did name his Theseus once.

Nonetheless, they've been rather sheltered horses so far. Wilbur brushes their coats and refills their water troughs and ensures their hooves are filed back, and at the end of it all gives them each a little pat on the head before leaving them to continue grazing.

The wind is cool today. Not icy or cold in a way that bites, but cool with a quiet feeling and a musty autumn scent that has Wilbur sitting down carefully on the morning dewed grass, his brown leather coat spread beneath him.

The Pogtopia coat. He had ripped out the L'Manberg flag patch sewn onto it ages ago, though he doesn't quite remember when. It had to be sometime before he threw himself off the cliffs in a futile attempt to escape reality, and the nightmares wherein reality manifests.

He shifts his mangled leg, again - it loses most feeling and motor control past the knee, but he gets it into a comfortable enough position.

Then, he lays down on the grass and takes in the soft blue skies. No clouds today.

Wilbur smiles, closes his eyes, and lets the winds brush the woody tang of forest over him.

~\*~

Wilbur has been lying there for an hour. Techno is reasonably sure he's asleep.

Then a tiny pill bug crawls across his lips without drawing reaction beyond twitching lips, and he's *absolutely* sure Wilbur's asleep.

Wilbur, like this, looks so... peaceful. Techno can't help but wonder, if things had gone just slightly differently, if he would have been gazing upon a similar expression framed by the wood of a casket instead of grass and tiny white flowers.

He wonders if there would have even been a body to bury, to mourn over. Or if New L'Manberg would have denied him a funeral or burial, as many places have the custom to do for traitors.

It is all past conjecture now. They are lucky, Techno realizes. Of all the scenarios that could have resulted for them on the 16th of November, what they have now is one of the best. Possibly *the* best.

He is considering the merits of dozing off beside Wilbur when a quiet, shrill whine jolts them both up.

*Wilbur woke up fast*, Techno notes, reaching a hand to steady his brother's frantic whirling of his head. He's also choking something down, which is rather alarming, but that motion passes quicker.

"What's wrong?" he asks. He has a suspicion, of course, because that was the distinct shriek of a young fox, and Wilbur looks a bit too much like Phil had when he first saw Wilbur amidst the destruction of L'Manberg.

"Nothing," Wilbur says.

"Wilbur."

"What? Am I wrong?"

"Technically no," Techno sighs, admitting to the principle.

The sound shrills from the forest again, slightly fainter.

"You talk strangely little about Fundy," Techno says. "I wouldn't judge if you just didn't care, but you... sort of do. Somewhat."

"It's - it's complicated," Wilbur says. He picks at a piece of grass, runs it along his fingers. "Even more so when Fundy's not here to talk to. I don't like thinking about it."

"You know Tommy wants to go back to New L'Manberg someday," Techno notes. "Probably when Ranboo's vacation is over."

"Do you want to go back?"

*Somehow*, Techno feels he should be the one asking Wilbur this question and not the other way around. But he indulges it nonetheless.

"If you and Tommy do, then you," he says. "Of course, that would mean dear old Dadza comes along as well."

Wilbur snorts.

Another shrill.

That young fox must be in a rather unfortunate situation, Techno thinks.

"It's calling for its parents," Wilbur says.

Techno turns him, frowning. Are his thoughts that obvious?

"I'm your brother, dickhead," Wilbur scoffs, nudging him. "Of course I would know."



He quiets, and then leans his shoulder onto Techno's before continuing.

"Anyway, it's wounded or something, and really desperate. An eagle or leopard will probably get it."

"The circle of life." Techno rolls his eyes. "Did Fundy ever make that sound to call for you?"

Wilbur gives him an unimpressed look.

"Fundy was 16 when I met him, Techno. He's older than Tommy."

"Still a child soldier, yeah?"

"...yeah."

Techno hesitates - and then finds himself abandoning all doubt to the wind to, rather awkwardly, sling an arm around Wilbur.

"I'd be the world's worst hypocrite to judge, really," he murmurs.

Grass crunches behind them.

"Thought you would've been fucking on about your freedom and anarchy thing."

Tommy sits down beside them.

Techno yawns.

"Thought you guys would have broken the anarchy thing down to give me a speech about how I shouldn't have hid my fears of losing control behind a coping mechanism that ended up destroying a country or something," he says.

"Is that what you call it? A coping mechanism?" Tommy's gaze sharpens.

Techno holds the silence briefly, distinct.

"And a war crime," he says. "Well - the terrorism was a war crime. Believing in anarchy is not a war crime."

"How much do you actually believe in the anarchy thing now?" Wilbur asks. "Like - out of mostly curiosity."

Techno turns the answer around in his head, as though giving it one last examination of flaws before presenting it for display.

"I can want anarchy to be the predominant reality because it benefits me the most while also understanding that it would not be the best thing for most other people," he says finally. "I may or may not have deliberately worded my speech to sound more sympathetic to the common person than I actually am."

"I'd be surprised if anyone fell for it," Tommy snorts. "Of course *you* don't care about the greater good of others."

"And you do?"

"Tubbo does, so..."

“So you care about Tubbo, not New L’Manberg.”

“I thought we established that already,” Tommy grumbles. “Besides, I somewhat cared about L’Manberg during the 16th. But after having to deal with the fucking bureaucracy again the few days afterwards... I got so tired of it, you know?”

“Bureaucracy gets annoying, yes,” Techno says. “But it is also inevitable. I suspect that is the true ire of most anarchists.”

“So you’re not going on an anarching rampage when we pay New L’Manberg a visit again?” Wilbur asks.

“We’re living anarchy right here, aren’t we?” Techno responds. He nods towards the sky - the clear, blue, open sky, and occasional dark shape that soars through its expanse.

Grass clumps, still wet with dew, beneath his fingers. And somewhere from the forest, Techno thinks he hears the sound of a crying fox kit slowly fading into a contented purr.

“Sanctuary-”

“I already said I put family first, before the anarchy,” Techno says. “So first of all, right now furthering my anarchist agenda would only hurt both of you, one way or another. And second, Wilbur, do you really think I would attack the people who rescued you?”

“It was mostly Scott,” Wilbur says.

“You’d also never be able to beat Pete’s record in the parkour garden if you set two withers on it,” Tommy points out.

“That too.”

“Kind of a petty reason to go against your ideals, isn’t it?” Wilbur asks.

“I am a petty man. Why do you think I dove off a cliff like you to avoid my problems?”

The words are out before Techno can filter them.

They all wince, with varying degrees of subtlety, at the memories.

“And,” Techno finally says. “I - I guess I am admitting that a lot of my anarchy spiel was developed because I wanted a position where people wouldn’t be able to hurt me. Since I just - I thought I would be fighting for the rest of my life, remember? I thought that’s all I’ll ever be known as. The Blood God, who everyone wanted to kill.”

“I can certainly corroborate this assumption,” Wilbur says. He frowns, and adds, “I mean the part where most people want you dead and thought it would bring them great fame to kill you. Not the part about how you’re just a killing machine. That’s wrong.”

“Very wrong,” Tommy says.

Techno knows this logically, of course, but his chest still warms at the words.

Ah, curse his... brain chemicals, or whatever.

“So... you thought the best way to protect yourself would be to make sure there’s no government?” Tommy asks.

“I can duel the best fighters in the land all I want and come out on top, but even I can’t stand against an entire army,” Techno says. “And for there to be an army - an organized attack against me that would have a chance of succeeding - there would have to be a government. Hence, my best interest ideology would be anarchy. And I guess I thought...”

He sighs. “I guess I thought that would extend to you two being under my protection too. I didn’t realize what Wilbur was planning, or how my line of thinking wouldn’t match up to yours at all. I didn’t want to think about it.”

“Because then all your reasoning would fall apart,” Tommy says.

That stings. But.

“Yeah,” Techno says.

It’s true. They had all been avoiding reality.

“I won’t build more withers,” he adds, somehow feeling the need for clarity despite everything else. “Or - destroying governments, I suppose. I think it’s best I put the violence in general behind me for at least a good while.”

Unless it comes knocking at his door again, like it is so prone to do. Techno hopes it doesn’t.

That’s what his family wants, right? And that’s what would help them the most. Keep a low profile, live a nice life on the mountains, occasionally explore a bit. No more wars or trauma or near death experiences. They can stay safe. They will.

“Yeah,” Wilbur hums. “I’d be happy to never write another piece of legislation in my entire life. Unless it’s for my game campaign.”

“Game campaign?” Tommy asks. Wilbur waves a hand.

“Something I’m working on with Hbomb,” he says. “I’ll tell you all when we get the details sorted.”

“Uh - sure,” Tommy says, sounding mildly dubious. “By the way, Ranboo’s coming up. He’s got gift baskets from the rest of the town as well, and - uh-”

“What is it?” Techno prompts when Tommy falls into a long silence. Once uncharacteristic - but many things they are now would have once been so.

“Me and Phil were discussing gifts too,” Tommy says.

“You know you don’t need to, right?” Wilbur asks. “For me, at least. I know Techno *loves* his gift-giving-”

“There’s no obligation,” Techno says, though the idea of gifts is something that has always made a deep, nestled part of him curl with delight. “Honestly, a nice day relaxing is about the best I hoped for.”

“But we wanted to,” Tommy presses. “So, uh - it’s not as dramatic as my birthday was, but we got some stuff. And it’s all in the house now.”

“Well then,” Techno says. “Don’t want to keep Dadza waiting, do we? Let’s take some pity on his old bones, still standing there waiting for us.”

Tommy snorts a laugh. Wilbur doesn’t bother hiding his.

~\*~

It turns out to be a simple and straightforward affair, which Techno knows both him and Wilbur appreciate.

They’re both handed books - blank ones. Wilbur’s is a regular journal shape, though much larger than usual, and the inside are rows of stark black lines with larger spaces between every 5.

Blank sheet music to record songs on.

Techno’s is smaller and square in comparison, and the pages clearly aren’t for writing. They’re thin and light and colored with patterns from flowers to spirals. In fact, there’s perforations that allow him to cleanly tear them from the spine.

“It’s origami paper,” Tommy says. “You - uh - I remember you used to really like making paper cranes when we were younger. There’s an instruction section on how to make a lot of other things too, and you love your experimenting, so - you know. We thought you’d like the extra hobby. Keep your hands busy a bit more.”

The book is a strangely heavy weight in his hands, the papers densely pressed together. Techno holds it to his chest for a second, two.

“Thanks,” he says. He has a feeling his and Wilbur’s bedroom ceiling won’t stay so bare for much longer.

Tommy grins - lights up, really, with the slightest bit of relief. So does Phil’s.

“And,” Phil says. “We also got - since you said you hadn’t made plans for what company would be publishing your book yet - we got in contact with a very well respected publishing house from a city south of here. You’ve worked with them before, actually - it’s the Karl Jacobs Publishing Center.”

“Karl Jacobs?” Tommy asks. “Isn’t he-”

“Quackity and Sapnap’s fiancé, yes,” Wilbur says. “Gods know how that relationship ever happened. I’d be amazed if they’re still together.”

“It’s the same Karl Jacobs,” Phil says. “He’s a famous name among publishing circles in Novixl, actually, and while this publisher isn’t run by him anymore they’re still well-respected.”

“So - they’ve agreed to publish a book that might be completed in a few months from some random nobody?” Techno asks. He wonders how Phil convinced them to do that. He had been half-convinced he would have to use the printing press at Sanctuary’s library and self-promote.

“I’ve provided enough proof, actually,” Phil says. “That you’re Whitelisted. Which you are, so it’s not deception or anything. Showed them the early access drafts of some of your previous stuff you left with me. Anyway, remember that nether star we got while coming here? That’s going to be the payment.”

“You’re paying them an entire nether star?” Tommy frowns. “Isn’t that - valuable?”

“We’re not going to light a giant beacon broadcasting our location,” Phil points out. “I got it because it was so cheap. The publishers will just sell it to the city - the name’s Beastire, I think - and they’ll have much better use for it.”

“That - that sounds great, actually,” Techno says. He feels a little lightheaded - also relieved he won’t have to undergo more social interaction than necessary. “When did you...”

“When Tommy was asking about ships, I began thinking about where we would go with them,” Phil admits. “Then the train of thought led here. I took a day to fly down there and make negotiations. You will have to show up in person once, though.”

“That’s fine,” Techno says. It’s far less hassle than he expected, really.

“And! Wilbur!” Tommy points to the kitchen table, where Ranboo has been hovering uncertainly. He gives a small wave.

There’s pies on the table, Techno realized. Pumpkin pie and cranberry pie and apple pie-

There’s at least a dozen pies. Full sized ones, too.

Wilbur loves pies. He loves them more than cake, in fact, though Techno has no preference.

“I went a little overboard with the baking,” Ranboo says, shifting. “Uh - sorry?”

“Better too much than too little,” Phil smiles. “We can store leftovers in the ender chest anyway. Sorry it’s not too much, Wil, but I did manage to get some ant eater meat for Ranboo to make a meat pie out of.”

Techno coughs. “What?”

He thinks the look of dawning delight on Wilbur’s face is, quite frankly, more terrifying than any “blood god” chant he’s ever done on the battlefield.

~\*~

They don’t end up going to the village today, content to gorge themselves on pie until night comes and occasionally play fetch with Clementine.

Clementine, it turns out, takes great joy in the fact that not one, but two people are now throwing sticks for her to chase. Sticks, and pieces of braided cloth, and maybe a bit of ant eater meat pie here or there.

It does make her kisses a little less appealing, though.

They also sort the little things Sanctuary has offered them - mostly more candies or a rare seed for a plant here or there. Scott has knitted both Techno and Wilbur squares of soft silk cloth, pink with red snowflakes.

Techno writes, slower than usual, and dozes off in the sunlight they have left more than once. Wilbur takes to playing his guitar sometime in the evening.

When they all go back inside, they have more pie and a bottle of wine is passed around. Techno takes only a few sips, finding it too dry on his tongue for more, but Tommy and Ranboo are allowed half a glass each while Phil and Wilbur share a few glasses between them.

Techno had protested at allowing the children alcohol, initially, but the rest of his family consider them old enough.

“Beside,” Phil adds, “Tommy has parental supervision. And Ranboo’s married, which automatically gives him wine rights.”

Not an excuse, but it’s not an issue Techno feels like arguing. Maybe Tommy will do something embarrassing when he’s tipsy.

Turns out, he just expresses more of a desire to hug Techno, which Techno of course indulges in.

He’s not happy about more hugs at all. He’s not.

He knows that’s a lie.

Ranboo became oddly sleepy, for some reason, soon ending up limp and curled around a similarly dozing Clementine on the couch.

Wilbur and Phil, by the end of their drinks, are giggling over something inane that Techno doesn’t feel like investigating. Instead, he announces an early retirement to bed.

A while later, still and half asleep, drifting through the veil of forgotten stories in the night, Techno hears Wilbur rustle beneath his own blankets.

And then, he blows out the fire of their lantern, and the world is plunged in black.

It has been a nice, peaceful day, and now they are all swathed in the beginnings of a nice, peaceful rest. For it is dark, and it is quiet, and it is safe within the protections they have built with their own resoluteness.

~\*~

*Entry 1, by Technoblade*

*Our situation is splendid.*

*Certainly.*

*Or, at least, our situation will be splendid eventually. Or I’ll threaten it into submission.*

*Farewell, until Wilbur forces my hand onto these pages once more.*

## Chapter End Notes

hnnnn not really satisfied with this chapter but what can i do? Idk let me know your thoughts

about tommy and ranboo having alcohol - underage drinking is kinda normalized in their culture okay. just as it still is in many parts of the world today irl. its getting constantly blackout drunk to avoid their problems that they’re wary of, not alcohol itself. techno would be considered weird

for not liking alcoholic content because of its taste in both New L'Manberg and many other areas (more so in southern novixl than northern novixl, actually, because the south more easily grows the crops that would ferment into alcoholic beverages so drinking is more normalized in their culture than in the north)

also yeah its been like 3 days since an update. was busy all three days. on tuesday and wednesday i was doing speech nationals with the nsda. as of typing this im waiting to see if ive broken to octofinals, am this editing chapter tomorrow (as in, as of writing this note. the chapter will be out the day its edited, so tomorrow will be today if you read it the night is comes out)

edit: oh my god this livestream they're announcing things on sldjflkdjls they're just recycling the same few slides congratulating people over and over to stall for usx being held up lmao

edit: DIDNT BREAK I GET TO GO TO SLEEP EARLY TODAY YES i should probably be more disappointed but honestly im just too tired for this lmao i still have two more years so its fine

# just wonder what you're dreaming of

## Chapter Notes

[discord](#) to get pings for updates/discuss stuff!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

They glide from one anniversary to another like a phantom in the night. Just as silent, unaware, the realization puncturing water in a thin, shattering screech which tells only that it's too late.

Phantoms are creatures which congregate towards the tired, the weary, the insomnia-plagued of past and present terrors. Wilbur hasn't had a proper, not-influenced-by-war-or-politics, true good night's sleep since... a long time.

They're getting better, though. Roughly. Sometimes.

And sometimes it feels like Pogtopia all over again. In those moments Wilbur wants to drag his mind back through the silt of ocean depths and leave it to fossilize around its dead and dying and desperate brethren.

This day he wakes like a lamp lighted without warning, fingernails dug deep into a blood-stained throat. His heart beats no better - he vaguely thinks of a canary in a magic show as he lays curled, unable to move, the organ thumping tight and fast and irregular as his hobbled gait, screaming for freedom against the sawblade whirring deceptively soft while all his muscles seize against invisible chains, cold as winter frost.

Techno is asleep.

He wants to beg for movement, for him to come over and pry Wilbur's own traitorous hands off his neck so badly - but there is nothing of importance his throat can do. It flutters soft, more fragile than a butterfly's wingbeats, once and twice, and then refuses to move again. He is silent and unable to call and at this point, he's not sure he can bring himself to do so even if given the chance.

From past experience Wilbur knows it might take another 10 minutes before his body remises back into some semblance of self control.

He usually wakes an hour before Techno does.

His throat is bloody.

It's not dangerous - surely he would feel it, if it's dangerous. As it stands the injuries Wilbur has inflicted on himself while trying to escape the throes of one nightmare or another are skin-deep, bleeding blood and peeled skin, but he always wakes somehow, before anything else happens.

He's simply gone along with it before. It's easy enough to clean up wherever his fingers decide it wants to snap or seize or scour clean of guilt in his sleep - usually his neck or wrists. He rinses it out and dabs some healing potion on, though potions can only heal the same wounds, no matter how light, so many times before scars start showing.



Recently, Wilbur has started wearing shirts with high collars. Soon scarves will be excusable, too, with the incoming winter.

The thought of hiding the scars, for some reason, grows more uneasy with Wilbur every day.

He's not sure he wants to hide it much longer. He had thought the episodes - at least the self harming ones - wouldn't last too long. They happen infrequently enough.

He has to say something sometime, though. That, he knows, is unavoidable.

*Winter is coming*, his memory informs him unhelpfully.

Winter. When it is so, so easy to slip off the cliff edge.

He's not doing that, though. Not again. Wilbur can't bring himself to reopen that wound with his family and he's established that a long while ago.

But the feeling of death cloaking itself around him, an eternal paradox he failed to resolve - it sinks into his dreams more often than not and follows back into the waking world, discontented with an end. Its chains, then, force his body down, pinned like a doll.

Wilbur's tried his best to avoid comparisons with Dream. He doesn't want to think about Dream, talk about him, feel again the phantom weight of dynamite pressing ultimatum into his fingers.

His best isn't good enough. It's not even decent, not in his waking moments. And his *dreams* reject the idea near entirely.

*Winter.*

It was close to winter - *was* winter - when they first arrived here. A little more than a month after L'Manberg's destruction - or desolation. Whatever people have chosen to name it as.

Something lands with a *thunk* outside the bedroom door. Or someone. It sounded like a particularly hard footstep cloaked in wool socks.

Techno would have once woken to that sound immediately. Now, the only indication of response is an unconscious twitch of his fingers, grasping around an imaginary dagger.

The very real one is still beneath his pillow.

It's why Wilbur shies from the idea of asking his brother for help - Techno's sleep schedule has been at least semi-consistent for the past 6 months. There's no way he can justify ruining it again.

This isn't some issue that can be talked out with hugs and words, after all. Or, if it is, Wilbur certainly doesn't know the combination.

Another *thunk* outside their door. Something croons, barks - wait, that has to be Clementine. Claws scabble against wood so hard Wilbur wonders if he should be worried about filling the scratches they'll leave.

"Don't bother them," Tommy's voice drifts faintly. "They're not early risers like us."

Clementine responds with a distressed whine, which is new.

Oh. Is she smelling Wilbur's blood?

He's not sure how he feels about this, actually. There's nothing constant in the way his family reacts to his problems anymore, nothing like how everything was back in L'Manberg or Pogtopia, when he could cling to the constant that Tommy was his brother and everyone else, a traitor waiting to backstab him.

The door creaks open.

"Why do you want to - holy fuck, Wilbur!"

That's definitely enough to wake Techno. From the corner of his eye Wilbur sees him jolt awake silently, eyes narrowing. They turn to hone in on Wilbur's bloodied throat.

"What happened?"

There's hands wrapped around his wrists. They're pulling his own away from the blood, the carnage. Tiny flakes sprinkle down his blankets, one of which is the same fluffy pink one dotted with red snowflakes Scott had so generously "donated" when his family first came to collect him from Sanctuary.

"Wilbur?"

The grip on his wrists is nice, Wilbur thinks. He wishes he could express the sentiment somehow, but his throat is limp as it has been since he woke up.

But. *The grip is nice*. It's Techno's, large and firm, his red eyes leaning down with a concern that borders panic. Tommy's own expression fights for space in his vision a moment later.

It's nice for someone else to be in control for once.

More pattering footsteps. A warm presence on his chest, four pressing indents. And then a wet washcloth is dabbing around his throat. Soft, and stinging, but that's nothing Wilbur isn't used to.

"It's - okay, it's not bad. Looks like his fingernails just scratched it up a bit." Tommy's half fearful, half furious expression disappears from sight.

"There's scarring," Techno says, quiet.

A wet tongue laps against his cheek. Clementine's brown eyes peer into Wilbur's, round and wide. A soft whine escapes her throat.

That's when the numbness begins to lift. The hand cupping his head, tilting it for a better angle, is what finally snaps the chains.

"It's only been a few times," Wilbur croaks out.

Tommy's face darts back into view so fast Wilbur wonders how he didn't trip.

"Wil! This has happened before?"

"Like - a dozen times? I don't know, it started after-" he tries to frown, and finds himself pleasantly surprised when he can. Clementine settles herself on his lap, rumbling softly. "Around July, I think. I don't know why."

“Fuck,” Tommy growls. “I - okay. Sometimes shit like this just happens for no reason, or - stupid fucking reasons. But you have to tell us these things, man.”

“I was - I wasn’t planning to hide it much longer,” Wilbur mutters. “Just thought I would wait to see if it stopped soon. If it wasn’t a huge deal I didn’t want to bother any of you.”

“Wilbur, I wake up before you do,” Tommy says flatly.

Wilbur remains silent. He doesn’t have a response to that.

He wishes he could stroke Clementine’s fur as a distraction. But even lifting a hand feels like an effort too monumental.

“Have you been trying to kill yourself in you sleep?” Techno asks, unknowingly answering the desire by moving to firmly hold his wrists down.

“No, it’s-” Wilbur tries to take a deep breath. “We all have nightmares, yeah?”

The winces he receives are more than enough confirmation, not that he needed any.

“Sometimes I feel like there’s something - something suffocating me in mine. It’s like this horrible weight on my throat, and it’s usually *in* my throat too, choking me from every direction - sometimes it appears as quicksand or gravel or even clouds, and sometimes it’s just a sensation in the darkness.”

A wet tongue laps at his hand.

“Oh,” Tommy says faintly. His eyes are wide.

“So I keep trying to get it off, or claw it out,” Wilbur mutters. “And sometimes I get too carried away with it, like today, so I wake up with - like that.”

His throat doesn’t even hurt. It’s just a light buzz, like rough leather was rubbed against it one too many times.

Something cold is brought to the area again - a washcloth soaked in something dark pink. Healing potion, Wilbur realizes, and he stays still as Tommy begins a second round of cleaning.

Slowly, the dull buzz dies as well, and he’s left with only the mildly raw feeling of newly healed skin.

“I’m - Sometimes it happens on my wrists too,” Wilbur says when Tommy’s done. He might as well admit it. Better late than never. “It’s like - really cold chains. On really bad nights there’s TNT glued to them, with a lit fuse.”

“That’s...” Techno trails off, and eventually just sits down beside him. Wilbur, after a brief moment of thought, manages to lean his weight against his shoulders. The motion is familiar, the feeling warm. A few seconds later Techno wraps his arm around Wilbur’s shoulders in reply. Clementine slips off his lap and curls herself onto his feet on the other side of the bed.

“And I - um. Afterwards I usually can’t move when I wake up,” Wilbur says. “Muscles feel like they’re stuck frozen. It’s only for a few minutes though.”

“Sleep paralysis?” Techno’s arm draws Wilbur closer.

It’s good that Techno’s initiating this contact on his own. He’s getting more comfortable with it.

Wilbur wishes the circumstances weren't because of his hypocrisy. Though, it's a bit too late for that.

"Is there a name for that?" he asks instead.

"It's pretty recent. The Novixl Guild of Doctors were debating over it a few years ago, but they've mostly agreed it's a medical condition and not, like, demons or something."

"Pity," Wilbur says. "I have a feeling Phil would have less trouble exorcising out of me demons than health issues."

"He's got some issues of his own," Tommy says. "I think stress is fucking with him too. We're not helping, especially since we're telling him about your... sleep paralysis. Today."

Today?

Tommy pauses, a motion of hesitation, before responding. "It's November 16th."

Oh. Wilbur had made note of that some time in the days before, hadn't he? The thought has definitely crossed his mind in the past few days, though not this morning until now. He supposes he had other things to think about when he just woke up.

"So we're celebrating our 1 year anniversary of not being miserable and in danger of getting stabbed every other day?" he finds himself asking.

Something like pride - not really pride, he's not sure he really deserves to feel *that*, but - something warm and rising with a hint of triumph smolders for a few brief seconds in his chest.

Of all the things to come to his mind. *It's that.*

It's a positive.

That has to count for something, right? Wouldn't his family be happy about it?

"I don't know about the 'being miserable' part," Tommy huffs, but his tone is light, joking, and also - relieved. "But yeah, this whole not getting stabbed or chased or executed thing is pretty fucking great, if I do say so myself."

"Yep," Techno says.

It's at this point something perks Clementine's ears up. She leaps off the bed, kicking Wilbur's feet into bending in the process, to trot towards the kitchen.

"Looks like Phil's begun cooking breakfast," Tommy says. "Let's get moving."

Techno loosens his grip around Wilbur's shoulders. Then he stands and coaxes Wilbur up with him, sliding the cane from its place leaning on the wall into hands that grasp it almost instinctively.

"Also, time to inform Phil you were being an idiot again," Tommy adds.

Wilbur doesn't hide his wince, but he does nod - an apology. Tommy and Techno both smile back in understanding.

They make their way to the kitchen, from where the smell of scrambled eggs and vegetable soup is already drifting.

~\*~

Phil is predictably distressed at Wilbur's situation, and even assigns him a bedtime "since your sleep schedule has somehow gotten more fucked than Techno's, and I didn't even know that was possible."

Wilbur promises up and down he'll try his best to comply. He even means it.

He has a feeling Tommy will be knocking on his door in the morning a lot more often.

~\*~

It's the 16th of November. Tommy has been tracking the day for the past week.

The fact doesn't feel monumental. It feels like it *should* be, but doesn't feel like it is, and that's a huge difference composed of questions and doubts and half-voiced requests for affirmation.

It's the anniversary of so much. Whatever they choose to focus on, however, this feeling of... *un-significance* still rests grounded.

They go down to Sanctuary a little earlier than usual today. Techno says he has some last-minute preparations to make for *The Camarvan* to ensure she makes it through the winter relatively unscathed. Wilbur simply wants to - what was it, socialize? - with people.

Wilbur. *Socializing* with people. He doesn't know whether to laugh or cry, and for all the strangest reasons.

Tommy supposes he can't begrudge him, though. Wilbur had been lacking in normal, no-strings-attached social interaction for so long, despite how much he craves the validation of others. Phil has gone with him, with some desire to make small talk as well. They'll be fine.

When one has all the time in the world, maybe the small things become more significant. Phil's mentioned such an idea to them before. Tommy thinks he's beginning to understand.

~\*~

"Trade from New L'Manberg's area peaked two months ago," the captain says. She's a tall woman with a shock of hair russet as autumn maple, and a scarlet parrot - scarlet macaw, actually, yellow and blue feather tips - squirming beneath an arm. "You might get lucky finding a ship willing to take you if you search around today, but the currents are better for travel north and south now. Before everything freezes over, that is."

She brushes back her hair and Tommy glimpses skin a shade too dark green to reasonably pass as human.

"That's fine, thanks!" Ranboo says. "We'll just - have a look at your wares now."

The captain gives a single nod, and turns back towards her crew.

"So. A year, maybe?" Tommy finally asks as they lean against the ship's railings, blinking against the salt spray. "Next November 16th?"

Ranboo sighs. The look on his face is full of longing - but not for anything across the sea. Instead it's directed back at Sanctuary.

“I don’t want to go back at all,” he mutters. “I mean - New L’Manberg’s recovering, Dream is laying off on his advances - apparently there’s even talks of a new peace treaty. Not that I ever, well, contributed much to the Cabinet in the first place, so I might as well-”

“Ranboo,” Tommy cuts off. He stands taller. “You - you’re willing to just *abandon* Tubbo like that? Never see him again?”

“Well - not never!” Ranboo protests. He holds up two hands, eyes down. A color-split tail lashes lowly. “I just - maybe when Tubbo’s got some line of succession sorted out and retires from being president. And then we can have a nice, stress free marriage.”

“I don’t know anything about this whole *marriage* shit,” Tommy says. “But you were - you were one of the few people keeping Tubbo sane. I know he’s got others now, and it’s been going better, but-”

He frowns, lowering his head back down.

Can he really think of Tubbo as being alone anymore? He’s living a life Tommy can’t even fathom, in the same way Tubbo can’t fathom his, no matter how many words or drawings or crinkled edges their letters exchange between them.

And even now, Tommy is planning another year before returning to L’Manberg. *New* L’Manberg. If he really wanted, he could definitely fly back across the ocean alone, and probably survive as well.

But. Not yet. *Not alone*. He doesn’t want to even entertain the suggestion.

His letters will have to do. Maybe he can get Techno’s opinion on some of the policy decisions to forward back to Tubbo.

“You two look like you’re in deep thought,” someone says. He has a strange accent, like each word is curled around a bubble.

Tommy glances up to see a man with dark blond hair curled just as much, wearing only a light cotton shirt and green slacks despite the near-winter chill. In one hand is a lead, leading to... a goat. A small goat blithering its tongue over the ship’s railings like they’re crusted in sugar.

“Salt, actually,” the man says.

“What?” Ranboo asks.

“I saw you looking at Lamb licking the ship rails,” the man says, his nods toward Tommy bouncing like a springboard. “She’s licking up the salt concentrated there, from the ocean waters. Which is, like, really cool right? They go *crazy* for this stuff and I actually bought her to see if I could have her clean our railing, but she keeps knocking over too much stuff so Impulse says I have to get rid of her.”

“That’s-” Tommy tries to pluck something from that ramble. “Her name is Lamb?”

“Yep!”

“But she’s a goat.”

“Well, duh,” the man says, rolling his eyes. He gives a theatrical little wave. “But we name each other things like Rose or Tango all the time. Doesn’t mean we’re *actually* roses or tangos, does it?”

“I have never met a single person named Tango my entire life,” Tommy feels compelled to point out.

“I have,” the man informs them without a single lapse in cheer. “I’m Zedaph, by the way. Might I interest you in the sale of a goat?”

“Why would we want a goat?” Tommy asks flatly.

“They taste better when they’re young, like this one!” Zedaph beams, poking Lamb in the cheek. She makes a motion like she’s trying to bite him. “Just like how lambs taste better than old sheep, you know? Lamb’s been on a diet of sweetgrass and berries too, she’s got really tender haunches.”

“Are you just - selling your pet off to be eaten?” Ranboo asks, mouth gaping just large enough to be unnerving.

Zedaph laughs, a careless noise that somehow, strangely, reminds Tommy too much of Dream’s echoing mockeries.

“Lamb’s not a pet, silly. She’s an experiment. A failed one too, since everyone tells me she’s getting too annoying to keep. So, you want her?” Zedaph nudges the goat away from the ship railing and lifts her into his arms, as though to show off some virtue of her breed.

Tommy blinks. He won’t deny that the idea of roast goat for dinner is appealing, but he’s not quite sure he can stomach one that’s been given a name and treated like a pet, even if this Zedaph character insists she isn’t one.

Also, as funny as it would be to eat a goat and pretend it’s a slight against Schlatt, that sort of petty revenge narrative isn’t the kind of thing he wants to indulge in. There’s no need to drag random little goats into the grudge.

“No thanks,” Tommy finally says.

“Try the rest of Sanctuary,” Ranboo offers. “They don’t have too many goats around here, so I’m sure someone will jump at the chance to try its meat.”

“Hbomb would love it,” Tommy mutters.

At the name, Zedaph perks up.

“Oh, I’ve heard of Hbomb! The guy who’s been in all the tournaments and helped hunt for the keys to that vault thingy!”

Tommy has heard of precisely *none* of that, but Ranboo narrows his eyes.

“That was - years ago,” he says slowly. “H doesn’t talk about that much, so how do you...”

“I have friends who met him back then,” Zedaph says, shrugging. “Maybe they can put in a good word for me and convince him to take Lamb off my shoulders.”

He pauses, squints, and then leans far too close to Tommy for comfort. “Also, I think I recognize you too, Tommy! Impulse would probably want me to tell you that he hopes you put those totems to good use.”

At that, Tommy chokes out a bewildered splutter.

Before he can ask any further, however, Zedaph begins skipping towards the planks and heading for Sanctuary proper, where a few other merchants have made their rest tonight. He even turns to give a

jaunty wave back when his feet touch the pier.

“What was that about totems?” Ranboo turns to ask Tommy, brows furrowing.

Tommy sighs. Somehow, some people are even weirder than him and his family.

“I’ll tell you later,” he says. “First, we have some letters to pick up.”

~\*~

Phil and Wilbur are having a nice, relaxed discussion with Hbomb over the shared languages of northern Novixl and northern Pyserne when someone with eyes a black far to deep to not be related to the void in some way kicks the tavern door open and yells “who wants a goat?”

Indeed, there is a goat, probably only a few months old, turning its head around the room with an expression that somehow manages to look both bored and vaguely irritated.

“Zedaph,” someone behind the man chides. “Stop doing that. You’re making us look bad.”

“Aww, I didn’t know you cared about our reputation!” Zedaph laughs back.

“Hello Zedaph, Grian,” Scott sighs from a place across the room. He, Pearl, and some other person named Joel are the only other ones here right now. They’re all part of the town council, which thankfully means Phil, Wilbur, and Hbomb don’t need to tread too lightly around the topic of Wilbur’s past in their conversation.

“Are the rest of you here too?” Joel asks.

Oh, now Phil realizes why the two men seem so familiar.

“Some of us,” Grian says, making a *so-so* motion with his hand that means Scott should probably stop his line of questioning. “We’re looking to get some, ah, *resources* from west Novixl, and thought we’d stop here.”

“I need to sell a goat,” Zedaph says brightly. “Her name is Lamb. Any takers?”

“Who the fuck names their goat *Lamb*?” Wilbur asks.

“Who the fuck names their rebellion hideout Pogtopia?” Zedaph mocks back with a sideways shake of his head.

“He’s got a point,” Hbomb laughs above Wilbur’s splutter.

Phil sighs. Of course they would *know*.

“*Anyway*,” Grian clears his throat. “Zedaph wants to get rid of his goat.”

“I’d like to have goat meat for dinner,” Wilbur whispers to Phil softly. A smile traces around the words.

He can’t have been loud enough for anyone besides maybe Hbomb to hear, but both Zedaph and Grian perk up.

“Oh, it’s Philza, isn’t it?” Zedaph asks. “Did you visit like... a while ago?”



“We were on your little island about a year ago, yes,” Phil says. He racks his mind for the name of their group, but it eludes him for now. “Are you all still there?”

“We’re moving bases soon,” Grian says as Zedaph marches over with the goat still splayed in his arms.

“Hello!” Zedaph says once he’s just a few steps away from them. “So what do you want to offer for a goat? I’m open to suggestions.”

“Little island... are you the ones Phil bought the totems from?” Wilbur asks, expression suddenly blank.

Oh. Right. That.

“Oh, yeah! Though that was mostly Impulse’s farm, getting us so many totems. Hope they were put to good use,” Zedaph says. “They’re really fun to play around with.”

He turns to Phil. “Anyway, goat?”

*Fun to play around with.*

Some people - beings - just operate by different rules. Phil wishes he could share the enthusiasm.

“Well-” Phil’s mind jumps to a previous statement they had made. “You’re moving west across Novixl, right? Do you need horses?”

“We have elytras,” Grian begins, only for Zedaph to interject.

“But I actually have some experiments planned with horses,” he says. “On the mountains and stuff!”

“Oh, right,” Grian says. He turns to Phil. “He wants to test how easily lone horses attract predators in Novixl’s different habitats, since horses aren’t native to the continent.”

“You people,” Scott sighs.

“We have two horses you can have,” Phil says. “I’ll go - uh, guide them down, I guess.” It’s nowhere near a fair trade, but the horses have been essentially useless for the past year, and while they don’t take *that* much to care for, they had to get rid of them eventually.

Besides, money is one of the few things they aren’t lacking in.

And, they have a ship. Phil doubts they’ll need to travel too far by land to most of their future destinations for now.

Zedaph beams, nodding.

Strange bunch of people indeed.

“Any chance you could invite me up for dinner when you cook up that goat?” Hbomb slides over, whispering.

Both Phil and Wilbur huff a laugh.

The horses take a good while to guide down, but as they were bred for mountain travel, Phil manages to lead them both back down to Sanctuary before sunset.

“Do they have names?” Zedaph asks, patting one on the head. “The goat’s is Lamb.”

“So you’ve said,” Phil says. He pauses.

“Theseus.” He points at the speckled black mare Techno had named when they first got one.

A few moments of silence pass before Grian speaks.

“And?”

“That’s it,” he says. “That’s the only one that’s named.”

“Seriously? Wow, and I thought *we* did favoritism with our animals,” Grian says.

“Shut up,” Phil grouses, glaring. “I’ll name the other one right now, if you want it so much.”

He turns to the unnamed horse, the one Wilbur had ridden during their journey here. A gray mare with spots drifted like clouds across her flanks.

“Uh...” What’s a normal horse name? Something to offset the naming disaster that is *Theseus*. “This one can be Molly.”

“Great,” Zedaph beams. He turns to Grian. “I’ll bet a piece of bamboo that Molly dies first. To a mountain leopard.”

“No thanks,” Grian says, giving him a hard shove that sends them both sprawling several paces back. “*You’re* the one in charge of the experiment.”

Zedaph takes a moment to return a sad pout before abruptly launching the goat towards Phil, who barely catches it in time to prevent his rather fragile bones from breaking under its flailing hooves.

“Have fun with Lamb!” Zedaph grins. “Now, we have a ship to return to and places to be, so... bye!”

With that, he takes the reins of the now rather bewildered looking horses and drags them, along with a grumbling Grian, back towards the harbor.

Phil glances down at Lamb. She’s now trying to chew on his wing feathers.

“Stop it,” he mutters, raising his wing out of the way. “Only my sons are allowed to do that.”

Sighing, he makes his way back to the tavern, where Wilbur, Techno and probably Tommy are now waiting so that they can make the trip back up the mountain once again. This time with a goat.

~\*~

*Oh, by the way, we’re considering a political marriage for Fundy too.*

*Yeah, it’s - I mean, we both want to avoid it. It’s looking less likely as of the time I write this letter, thankfully, but if it does go through it’ll be to this princess from Larkensal, to the south.*

*Tommy, I can already feel your retching from here. Neither Fundy or that princess were very happy about it either.*

*It's just a last resort if Dream decides to attack further over us absorbing Secare, since the Dream SMP's southern regions rely so much on Larkensal to provide iron and copper.*

*Hopefully, it doesn't happen, and me and Ranboo are the only people who have to go through a political marriage around here.*

*Hypixel has been providing the support they promised, and so has the Sparklez Kingdom, though Hypixel himself keeps trying to convince me to let them use some naval bases that are way too close to the city of L'Manberg for comfort. He also wants to purchase private land in New L'Manberg, which I've fended off so far by saying New L'Manberg's citizens and foreign merchants participating in our economy are the only ones allowed to own land so far as part of reconstruction efforts, with the exception of embassies. I might have to start being more firm about that.*

*I don't want to appear like I'm scared of them, though. If Hypixel starts pushing the issue I'm not sure how much I should resist.*

*At least Sparklez hasn't tried to make any alarming moves. Yet.*

*Anyway, New L'Manberg's economy has been recovering nicely. As usual. Dream tried another blockade on our northern ports last week, but Sparklez' ships were there and threatened to fire cannons if they didn't leave, so they did. A bit too easily, actually. I think some of Dream's northern provinces are starting to resist his rule too.*

*New L'Manberg is now nearly 3 times bigger than it was back in November 16th. We're looking to make deals with some other provinces that will change that number to 6 times bigger. We'll still be a lot smaller than the Dream SMP even then, but it'll be a start. Especially once Secare's harvests are stored for New L'Manberg's citizens for the winter instead of being taxed by the Dream SMP like before.*

*Speaking of which, I just got news! A message from Dream saying they wouldn't send the military to retake Secare if we work out a trade deal that would supply them a steady flow of grain. I guess we did take a major agricultural center away from them. I'll have to talk with the Cabinet and some of Secare's leaders before I decide anything.*

*Anyway, this is a lot of policy talk I don't think you really care to read. Ironically, Wilbur would find this pretty fascinating.*

*I know you're making plans to come back. Ranboo probably wants to when I'm no longer president, whenever that's going to happen. The assumption right now is that I'm going to be dictator until someone oust me from power, or until I retire. Given the track record of previous world leaders, probably when someone ousts me from power.*

*I haven't told anyone else this, not even Fundy, but - I'm already drafting plans for an election and more democratic system. Remember when I said we have a lower parliamentary body for laws right now? The first assembly was appointed by me and members of the cabinet, but I've already got the announcements for a term limit written, and in a year or two I'll change them to be elected positions too.*

*It should appease the public a bit more. They're not happy with some of my decisions, especially regarding the presence of Sparklez Kingdom troops along our border with Dream.*

*I'm sorry, I said you wouldn't be interested in policy and then proceeded to talk more about policy. What I'm getting at is that I'm slowly implementing steps to transition New L'Manberg into a*

*democracy. Or at least a system of government that won't completely screw over the citizens while also allowing me to retire within the next two decades.*

*I'm not sure when I'll be able to retire and have my last few signed laws include the overall election plans. It's probably going to be at least another ten years, unfortunately, from the looks of things. Real progress is so much slower than it looks, but time blurs by for me so fast as well.*

*Also, as per your and Ranboo's insistence, I've cleared my office of alcohol. As of writing it's been three weeks since I've drank anything.*

*I know you're not impressed. But I'm impressed. That's a good record for me. I'm hoping to reach four weeks before the next major incident happens and I want to smash my head open on the White House steps again.*

*By the way, I told Fundy that I was in contact with you, though I didn't tell him the specifics. Swore him to secrecy too. Dream's not actively hunting for you anymore, but you're still on the wanted list. He just says hi. I'm sure there's more he wanted to say, or will eventually want to say, but I guess after everything it's become too much to come up with anything else.*

*It's been so long, you know? We've been in contact, but Fundy's learned to move on without Wilbur's shadow looming over him. He had to, to focus on being vice president. I really have no idea how a meeting between him and Wilbur now would go.*

*I didn't say anything about you being with Wilbur - he, like everyone else, continues to think Wilbur's dead - but I did ask him what he would say to Wilbur if he could.*

*He says he would say he's sorry for a lot of things, especially regarding how disastrous his and Wilbur's relationship was in the months before the 16th. That he's not eager to talk to him again, but he's not too opposed to it either. I think he's not too sure what to think.*

*He also told me I better not be thinking of doing any "weird necromancy shit". I think he's scared I might be trying to resurrect Wilbur to take over my president job for me or something, which would be pretty funny.*

*I doubt Wilbur would appreciate being president again very much. I'm starting to understand how he went insane enough to want to blow L'Manberg up.*

*Not that I ever would, but. As usual, the job is being quite awful even on the best of days.*

*I know Ranboo wants to extend his vacation until I step down. I don't fault him for that. I don't want to get his hopes up yet, but I do think we can get away with another year of him at Sanctuary. I'm working on it.*

*Also, I got an emotional support animal like you suggested. Or group of animals. It's a bee apiary in the White House courtyard, and it is amazing. I've named the queen Tubbee because I can and no one gets to judge me for it, not even you.*

*The flowers are really nice too. I finally got some moobloom bulbs planted...*

*~\*~*

*Tubbo, I'm writing this letter right after reading your most recent one, and it is the 16th of November.*

*A whole year. Quite amazing, how much things have changed during this time. They say the first year after a war is always the hardest.*

*Maybe it feels like I should be waxing poetic about the past year and the significance of having made it this far, but do I really fucking need to?*

*Why would we need a recap of what's happened? We lived through it. We've made good and bad memories - mostly good for me and mostly bad for you - and we've come through alive. We remember what is significant to us, or at least enough of it, and we have our past letters as a timeline.*

*What I'm saying is - I've come to the conclusion that the whole "take the day to relax and see how far you've gone" mentality is kinda bullshit. Especially when people ascribe all sorts of weird significances to new years or holidays or anniversaries.*

*I mean, sure, it's great to do that sometimes, and maybe for some people it means a lot, but to me it's always been rather pointless to focus on a specific day.*

*You can guess where I'm going with this. Throughout today I've been thinking of how things should feel more monumental. A year since the 16th and all that. And then I'm continuously struck by how normal everything is. How peaceful and quiet and - relatively nice.*

*Don't get me wrong, it's definitely not all sunshine and rainbows. Wilbur was being an idiot this morning again. But it's just - we worked to make it this way.*

*We worked, so hard, to make sure our days are as peaceful and steady as today's has been. Wilbur actually fucking elaborated on his problem without us poking at him for weeks. That would have been unbelievable 10 months ago.*

*We worked and talked and cried and hugged so that this November 16th would pass as carefree as any other day around it, and we continue so things will get even better. I think that's the thing I'm proud of.*

~\*~

"You've got to be fucking kidding me," Tommy says, staring at the bleating goat in front of him. There's even a name tag on her which he missed the first time, *Lamb* scratched in half legible writing.

"Looks like we know what we're having for dinner tomorrow," Phil says, clearly hiding a grin.

"Weird looking lamb," Techno says with a raised eyebrow.

Tommy resists the urge to kick this stupid goat off a cliff.

## Chapter End Notes

surprise double update haha

i reply to comments lives! [twitch](#)

[tumblr](#) and [twitter](#) for questions and art!



# sobriety is dead, so let the arrow fly

## Chapter Notes

[discord](#) to get pings for updates/discuss stuff!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

As winter nears, they prepare.

Techno and Tommy chop firewood for nearly a week. It's mostly stored in the cave-turned-stable area, though now devoid of horses. The winter may drastically cut back on monster spawns, but the difficulty in chopping wood with freezing hands is arguably more annoying. Wilbur knows most of them would rather deal with a skeleton lurking in the corner.

Wilbur remembers when he was with them in the forest, around this time last year. All glaze-eyed and desperate to be gone. In hindsight, Techno had probably spent more time watching to ensure he didn't chop his own arm off than gathering wood of his own.

He's not able to join them now, though. A culmination of that very same desperation. Perhaps it's better this way.

They have a new companion in the form of Clementine, anyway. She often dashes towards the forest before even Techno or Tommy in the mornings, the swirling autumn leaves a delight for her to swim through. He wonders which of them caused more distraction.

It's a thought exercise in futility, and soon Wilbur resolves himself to shed the rather embarrassing idea of competing for levels of nuisance with a dog.

Instead he endeavors towards other things. Phil's knitting and sewing has taken on a near obsessive pace, mending and making adjustments to their previous winter clothes. He softens fur for new hats and padding wool for more body on their coats, and sometimes Wilbur sits down to assist him.

They convert a sparse storage room in the house into a temporary chicken coop as well, complete with a door to an outside area, and down the place with hay and fluff. There's no reasonable way to keep a fireplace going in the normal coop.

Then they buy what fruits and other goods they can from the merchants in Sanctuary before the harbor freezes, dry and smoke some and store them all in crevasses they had dug out in the ravine, where the air and even time itself seems to hold more still.

The house itself gets upgrades too, though it's mostly unnoticed - Techno and Phil do more checks for structural integrity, and they reinforce the doors and windows to the point of near redundancy. It doesn't hurt to be prepared, however, and Tommy certainly is taught a lot during those operations while Wilbur plays with the chickens and Clementine.

Techno and Phil also lay snare traps around the outer edge of the canal that rings their home, as the water will freeze over soon. Far fewer monsters do not mean no monsters at all, after all. Wilbur

would have helped them, once upon a time, but his leg can't be maneuvered and a wrong misstep could end with a rather unfortunately wire-slashed throat, so he's forced to stay clear as well.

So instead, it is Tommy who slips into the seams. Wilbur feels more pride than he thinks he's ever held when he watches from the steps of their house as Tommy methodically, carefully, loops the snares and sets them in place, and eventually progresses into a stream of actions nearly as smooth as Techno's.

He's nearly an adult now, at least by human standards. Gods know whatever standard *Phil* is on, and whether he's holding them to it.

The air crisps light with frost when he steps into the dawn. Wilbur has mostly healed from his injuries. As healed as he can be, anyway. From the physical ones.

When the first snowfall comes it is gentle and light and cold as their still flowing rivers. It is then Phil decides exercises for his leg are to be restrained to the house and their yards. It is also the day he makes hot chocolate again, their stores of cocoa powder almost excessive to the degree they've bought and hoarded it.

On a pillow and bundled in blankets with his family, Wilbur sips the warmth around the fireplace and feels it flood through his veins.

~\*~

Winter comes and as it trails its cloak of white over the world, Phil is prepared to shield his children as much as he needs to. He hopes it is enough.

~\*~

"It's weird, isn't it?" Tommy asks. "Feels different."

"Different how?" Techno responds, still sharpening his knife. There's tiny knicks at the edges, probably from all the times he's dug it into wood and logs to get a better grip.

He's not supposed to be using his knives this way, these knives designed to slice flesh and weather bloodstains that drip down the groove carved into the hilt and down his hands like a cold spell.

But beyond the fish or occasional animal they butcher, there's not much other use for it. Perhaps as a nice fashion accessory.

Techno remembers when throwing-knife earrings were considered "high fashion" on Hypixel. Horrible times. Social interaction alone there was bad enough, but being constantly distracted by the sound of clinking metal had heightened his paranoia to new heights. He kept seeing phantom assassins, shapes waiting to strike his neck.

The fact that he had been so set off by the seemingly innocuous sounds probably says a lot more about him than whoever had the misfortune of interacting with him, really.

"Last winter, we had-" Tommy winces as something thuds hard against their house's door. The whirr of blizzard is mostly dulled from the walls of their house, to the point where it slips seamlessly to background noise after a while. But of course, there are occasional reminders like that.

The wind really likes to attack their door. Techno wonders what it ever did to deserve such treatment.



“This is - it’s different. But also the same,” Tommy says. Something nervous edges the words.

“That’s how it is with most things,” Techno says. But he glances at Wilbur, dozing by the fireplace against Phil, mostly obscured by a large black wing.

“He won’t try it again,” Techno somehow feels the need to add, even after all this time. His voice remains quiet as before. “He’s better.”

“I know,” Tommy says, wringing his hands. He’s careful not to disturb Clementine sleeping beside him. “But it’s - it brings some bad memories, you know? A night with a blizzard, like this - I used think the snow was a just some fucking nuisance. Sometimes fun. Now I don’t...”

He frowns, hunching into himself.

“Now I don’t know,” he sighs. “I don’t know what to think about it. ‘S all weird, like - sorta like how it was before, but now I’m extra nervous or something. Or *something*.”

Techno remains silent a few moments longer. He doesn’t quite know how to feel about something like... *winter* either. Or heavy snowfall. Whatever it’s called, or defined as - all white blurs and icy veins.

He knows trauma can cause associated features of the event to be soured to the victim. But then, it should be Wilbur who is unnerved by the snow, who wishes to shy away from it. And yet he had taken in the sound of an incoming blizzard with what seemed like mere faint curiosity before retiring into soft slumber beneath Phil’s wing.

The rest of them are not the ones who suffered near death by its hand in some way. Though, Techno supposes that as it had been a suicide attempt, the cold was not more to blame than the height of the mountain.

Would having to navigate a brother’s suicide attempt and the desperate search for his still potentially alive body count as a traumatic experience? Techno hadn’t thought so, but that is because he discounts nearly everything as not traumatic to himself. He hasn’t actually considered it much further.

“I think... I think it’s okay to feel uneasy about it,” he begins, testing the words for himself. Is he allowed to be scared of something like that? Like... a blizzard? A fear beyond the practical?

Tommy gives him a strange look.

“Of course it’s okay to *feel* something like that,” he says. “It just seems a little silly to me. Childish. You know?”

Techno glances at Wilbur and Phil, by the fireplace again. It’s starting to look more inviting than the couch they’re on, but the warmth spreads far enough and he’s not sure he can bring himself to leave the rather comfortable position, even for the prospect of one even more so.

“We’ve spent the past year dealing with what could be called rather ‘silly’ ideas,” he finally says. “As long as it doesn’t bring harm, I suppose.”

“Yeah,” Tommy says. “That.”

There’s a loud whooshing sound as the wind picks up for another brief moment.

Wilbur shifts in Phil's arms, and Techno sees Phil wrap his other wing around him as well. He looks seconds from falling asleep himself.

The ground around them is carpeted and covered in pillows, blankets. Techno can feel the warmth from here.

That makes up his decision, then. He lifts himself up and makes his way over.

Tommy quickly follows.

Phil doesn't look too surprised to see them, but his wing's radius quickly shifts to encompass Tommy within the feathers without a word. Techno's too large for that, so he settles on laying down against Phil's side and closing his eyes.

Regardless of whatever emotions or ideas they may hold, willingly or not, they're safe and warm and just fine here.

Techno falls asleep quickly.

~\*~

They have a lot of time in the winter, shut away in the house. There's snow to be cleared and monsters to untangle from the snares and the occasional, less frequent trips to Sanctuary to be made, but that's rather the extent of it. Clementine runs through the house bounding with slightly less energy than the warm months, sleepier and more prone to soft snuggles, though the chickens cluck around pecking each other as usual.

Due to how much more difficult mountain travel has become with the snow and ice sheets, Ranboo tends to stay for a few days before leaving to return to Hbomb's house, and Phil flies him up and down for the trips.

He laughs the first time Ranboo stares into the world below with wide, terrified, wondrous eyes. Phil hasn't seen that expression since he first took Tommy flying in his arms.

Maybe Phil will lend him an elytra to try some day. He had only ever intended them to be of use for his family, but Ranboo is close enough to Tommy and even the rest of them that he could maybe make an exception. Especially considering his own End origins.

They all pass the time in the house with chatter and games and their own activities as well - Phil likes to knit and sew and create far more than what is necessary, he knows, a product of keeping his hands busy in the absence of monuments or structures to build. He flies as well, trips around the mountains, through gorges and spiraled peaks, reveling in the cold air of the currents.

Techno digs back into his book with fervor, writing and editing and cross referencing his previous research notes. He's even begun to grow a few spuds in pots inside the home, for a few final tests. Beyond that it's all violin and reading and occasional hunting trips.

Wilbur and Tommy share the guitar. It was meant for Wilbur, but they pass it with quiet agreements and play nearly every day, chords soft and lyrics silly. They play other things too, games and stories they often drag the rest of them into. Phil has more fun than he admits, and he knows Techno does too.

It's almost like the home of years past, when they were all younger, even Phil. He's not sure whether what they have now is stronger, more stable with the bent wires in the process of ironing, but he hopes

the moments will last. They're all content to live a good few years like this, aimless as morning clouds on a pale blue sky.

Ranboo joins Tommy on his adventures with the chickens, nudging them against each other and taunting them with mazes and strange food. And they spar in the living room often enough that Phil knows to keep his mugs of drinks away if he's not attending to them. Sometimes, in afternoons when the sky is clear and snow newly settled, they move into the backyard.

Phil mostly stays away from those snowball fights. He has no wish to have his feathers clogged wet again. Wilbur sits on the porch by his side as well, though sometimes a flash of wistfulness crosses his face.

Techno, though, holds no mercy. For a piglin hybrid he is *very* well adjusted to the snow. Whenever he drags himself into the fights they almost always end with Ranboo and Tommy shrieking to be let up.

To those pleas he then relents and lets go, quicker than he used to.

~\*~

They're down in the ravine again, which has more or less, unexpectedly, become their game or hangout area on darkening nights. There's couches and blankets and pillows, and they've even wrestled a table down here. The walls are no longer so rough or shadowed, but instead mined clean and lit with almost a lantern too many.

"Never have I ever declared someone was my son," Tommy says. His face is kept straight - too straight.

Phil rolls his eyes and adds a marble to his pile. So does Wilbur.

He almost does a double take when *Ranboo* adds a marble as well.

"You look a bit too young for that," Tommy says, squinting.

"It wasn't - it wasn't anything serious," Ranboo says. "There was this zombified piglin that followed me out of the Nether once, and I took care of him for a while. So I joked he was our son when Tubbo asked what I was doing."

He sighs, a shadow flashing in his eyes. "We named him Michael and everything. But the public would ask too many questions and we would have another potential hostage, and neither of us really had the time to keep it up, or - or knew what we were doing. So in the end we gave him to some other people to care for."

"That's - uh..." Phil had taken in Tommy when they were just building the Antarctic Empire. And thinking back, that had been a bad idea, but there's no way he can fathom having so little time for Tommy he would have just *abandoned* him.

Or given him away to somewhere else, like Ranboo and Tubbo had done.

"The son thing was a joke, though," Ranboo murmurs. "We had Michael for like a week, and we were mostly keeping him locked alone in a spare room, so it's not like we had time to get attached all that much."

He winces. “We weren’t exactly good parents either. It was better for all of us. But - well. Sometimes I wonder.”

“Some people just aren’t in a position to be good parents,” Wilbur says quietly. He rolls a marble between his fingers and the arm of the couch. The center is a yellowed slit like a cat’s eye. “Even if they want to be.”

It’s not a slight against Phil. In fact, Phil knows it’s meant to be an affirmation from Wilbur towards himself, that Phil was a good parent despite everything. After all, they’re here.

Phil has the chance to do better. He’s taken it. He’s working on it. Ranboo didn’t have the same luck.

Not that an older child taking care of a younger one ever really works out well for either.

“Anyway,” Techno clears his throat. “I believe it’s Phil’s turn.”

Oh, right. *Never Have I Ever* always yields some interesting results, though they’ve substituted the drinking with piles of marbles under the agreement that whoever ends up with the largest collection is the loser.

Wilbur is currently in the lead. Unsurprisingly.

Phil racks his mind, trying to think of something he might actually be surprised by the results of. It’s rather hard to play this game when he has 2000 extra years worth of time to make mistakes, however.

“Never have I ever...”

His mind is blank for a long moment. Tommy eventually snorts.

“Dadza’s really done it all,” he says. “So many fucking embarrassments under his belt, I swear.”

“Never have I ever called someone *dad*, ” Phil finally says, glaring at him.

Everyone else adds a marble to their pile, including Ranboo. Phil wonders what his parents thought of their son being shipped off to a foreign country as part of a political alliance marriage.

“You guys are so original,” Wilbur says. “Anyway... never have I ever set a pub on fire before.”

Phil, Tommy, and Techno all add another marble.

Techno isn’t a surprise - but Phil wonders when Tommy did that. He certainly doesn’t look like he’s going to elaborate.

Now it’s Techno’s turn. He takes a second, and then says clearly, evenly, “Never have I ever gotten drunk at a political meeting.”

There's a series of groans as everyone else adds a marble to their pile.

“You could have just said ‘never have I ever gotten drunk,’” Tommy grumbles. Phil clears his throat.

“Wait-” Tommy’s eyes widen. “Really?”

“It was *once*,” Techno says, huffing. “Because I was curious as to why everyone else is willing to suffer through something as terrible tasting as beer just to become completely incapacitated. The experience only reinforced the idea that the rest of you all are crazy for enjoying this.”

“I had to make hangover noodles for him the next morning,” Phil says, hiding a grin. “Techno, you said some rather interesting things while you were drunk-”

“Do *not* bring that up-”

“What did he say?” Wilbur asks, leaning forward with that familiar, terrifying eagerness.

Phil laughs. “I think I’ve embarrassed him enough for tonight.”

In truth, it had actually been rather sad. Between expressing, surprisingly articulately, many doubts about his abilities, purpose, place in the world, and whether or not he deserves his family, Techno had clung to Phil’s shoulder like a lifeline and begged him not to leave “like Wilbur and Tommy did.”

Phil promised he wouldn’t, then.

He doubts even Techno remembers most of it.

“Anyway, Ranboo’s turn!” Techno says a bit too loudly. Tommy laughs.

“Oh - okay,” Ranboo says. “Uh - never have I ever smuggled something illegal across country borders.”

Like the last three times, everyone else takes a marble.

Phil thinks the amount of illegal goods he’s smuggled in his lifetime is enough to make up an entire city’s economy.

“My turn again!” Tommy chirps. “Never have I ever dissected an animal just to find out where its genitals were.”

Wilbur splutters, but reluctantly adds another marble to his pile.

“*One time*,” he mutters again. “Why isn’t *anyone else* curious about where fish hide their balls?”

Ranboo’s eyes widen when Phil adds a marble as well.

“I am very old,” Phil defends. “And I’ve done a lot of things.”

He also may or may not have been drunk.

Oh. It’s his turn again.

“Never have I ever...” Phil pauses. His pile is nearly as big as Wilbur’s. “Never have I ever tried to marry a concept.”

He almost says “object,” but he’s definitely tried to make vows with his swords or the occasional coconut before. While drunk.

There may or may not be a pattern there.

“I hate you,” Tommy grumbles, adding a marble. Wilbur rolls his eyes and adds one as well.

“Hah!” Techno crows. “I told you all getting drunk is a terrible decision!”

“Marry a concept?” Ranboo asks.

“Wilbur tried to marry the idea of L’Manberg when he was drunk once,” Tommy says. “And I - uh. I said I was ‘married to the grind’ a lot back then.”

“The grind of what?” Ranboo asks.

Tommy shrugs. “Concept,” he says, and leave it at that.

It’s Wilbur’s turn again.

“Never have I ever successfully performed necromancy,” he says.

Phil adds a marble - and to his mild surprise Techno does as well.

“It was just an experiment to see if I could,” Techno grumbles when everyone else shoots him curious looks.

“*Successfully* performed necromancy?” Ranboo asks.

“Wilbur’s definitely tried,” Techno says. He pauses. “So has Tommy, actually.”

“Listen, when your dad’s literally called the *Angel of Death*, you get a *little fucking curious*-”

“How did you do it successfully?” Wilbur asks, rounding back to Techno. “I thought I got the translations right-”

“I’m the language nerd, not you-”

“Alright,” Phil clears his throat. “Techno.”

Techno stops. He glances between Wilbur and Tommy for a few seconds, and then says, “Never have I ever named a ship.”

There’s grumbling as Phil, Wilbur, Tommy, and Ranboo all add marbles.

“When did *you* name a ship?” Tommy asks Ranboo. “And who was dumb enough to let you?”

“When I first arrived at New L’Manberg for the wedding,” Ranboo says, shooting Tommy a scowl. “They let me name 3 ships, actually. Some sort of ritual or honor or something. I’m not sure.”

“New L’Manberg does have a lot of ships,” Wilbur says, something thoughtful in the way he says the fact.

Tommy yawns. This should be finishing this game up soon, Phil thinks. It’s about time for bed.

Besides, despite Wilbur’s best efforts, he still has quite a few more marbles than Phil.

“Never have I ever asked my dad if it was possible to fuck a salmon,” Tommy announces.

Phil chokes as Wilbur flicks a marble into his pile. Gods, he’s tried *so* hard to scrub that moment from his memory.

Needless to say, Wilbur lost that game.

## Chapter End Notes

yes, Lamb had an offscreen death as a very delicious dinner for SBI. Hbomb and Ranboo were there too.

most of you have no idea about the incredibly cursed discussion that happened on the discord about this chapter about wilbur and fish lmao it is forever burned into my memory

i reply to comments lives! [twitch](#). if you're reading this the night it comes out i should finally do a stream tomorrow sunday morning est

[tumblr](#) and [twitter](#) for questions and art!

# the bench may be of iron, but we can collect our thoughts nonetheless

## Chapter Notes

[discord](#) to get pings for updates/discuss stuff!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Winter morning after a harsh night of snowfall is, in Tommy's opinion, the absolute fucking worst. Right after wars, and TNT, and withers, and running a country, and trying to make sure his best friend doesn't go insane running a country, and dealing with brothers that throw themselves off cliffs for reasons different and yet so similar, and-

Alright, maybe snow isn't the worst. In fact, one could argue it's a very high step up from the problems Tommy used to deal with.

Tommy tells that argument to shut up. Evidently, its logic has never shoveled its mountain house's doorway clear of snow before.

Wilbur, the idiot, attempted to *help* them at first, protesting that his hands work just fine. When his knee buckled the first time, within a few minutes, he's relegated firmly to sitting on a chair they'd dragged out for him.

"This is so fucking annoying," Tommy growls once again, ignoring Wilbur's comment of "*if you let me help it'll be less annoying!*" He resists the urge to kick a particularly large swathe he doesn't feel like clearing, but the idea of getting snow in his boots stays that action. "Phil, are you *sure* you don't have magic that can magically melt it?"

"I am the Angel of *Death*, Tommy, not the Angel of Snow. That would be way less terrifying to my enemies."

"It would technically be the Angel of Temperature," Techno chimes unhelpfully.

Tommy groans as Clementine's giant shape floofs deep into the pile he's just shoveled up, battering his face with cold chunks of white.

He's tempted to try starting another fire, but the mountain winds are particularly harsh today and his previous three attempts had been snuffed out within a minute.

"Tommy!" Techno calls. "Help me shove this layer away. It's all frozen solid."

With a sigh, Tommy ambles towards his brother. Behind him, Clementine yaps happily.

At least one of them is having fun.

~\*~

"No, that's not - there's these massive mountains in the way, you can't just *teleport* across them."



“Then I fly across them,” Phil says, as if it’s the most logical solution in the world.

Wilbur throws a dice at his face. It bounces off Phil’s forehead and rolls back across the table to stop at *1*.

Hbomb snickers.

Damn stupid D&D rules.

“So you’ll just - abandon your team?” Wilbur splutters. “Everyone else in the group? To fuck off into the mountains?”

“And build a cabin and live far, far away from all this war bullshit,” Phil nods. “But I understand that might take another turn or two.”

This draws laughs from both Hbomb and Scott, and even Pete looks faintly amused.

“But that’s-”

“But that’s what, Wilbur? Dumb? A bad decision?”

Wilbur groans.

“Roll a stamina check,” he mumbles.

Phil plucks a dice from the scattering on their table map and flicks.

It rolls for a few torturously long seconds before coming to a neat stop, black inked *20* displayed clear and proud.

“Okay.” Wilbur takes a deep breath. “And you have those stupid bonuses too.”

Fucking damnit. And he has to go along with this.

“You escape the dragon’s breath attack by flying away, towards the mountains, instead of helping your kind, loyal teammates-”

Pete clears his throat. “We are literally a bunch of war criminals.”

“-instead of diving back to help your teammates who have been with you for the past few months through thick and thin,” Wilbur grits. “I repeat - you decide to just fuck off into the mountains and - fly across them or something. Your wings are strong and your energy is used well, so you are able to glide a good distance.”

“Gonna find some poor abandoned children to adopt along the way.” Phil grins.

“Is it my turn yet?” Hbomb asks.

“Yes, fine. You have an action-”

“I bring up Section 23 Paragraph 8 of the Snotian Codes of Law, which states that it is illegal for non-human creatures to be within the boundaries of Snote’s capital city, so therefore the dragon is breaking the law and must leave.”

“The same Section 23 *I* wrote to clarify the laws of the nation in this campaign,” Wilbur says. His fist clenches a little tighter. He very noticeably does *not* let out a low grumble.

Hbomb is unrepentant in his amusement. “Yes.”

“The one that was intended as a guideline for you guys-”

“I don’t see how it matters since you canonized it!”

“As realistic worldbuilding! You guys were asking and I can’t just leave a piece of legislation half-finished!” Something within Wilbur viscerally recoils at the idea of not properly drafting, revising, and *clarifying* the law. The literal law! “Who do you think I am, *Schlatt*? At least *I* had the decency to actually pass my proposals.”

“How much of L’Manberg’s legislation *did* you write?” Scott asks. A curious tilt lines his eyes.

“Too much,” Wilbur grumbles.

Then he realizes what he’s just said.

Bringing that up in a - a *casual D&D campaign*. Fucking gods, what is wrong with him? There was no need to-

He’s getting too comfortable, Wilbur realizes. And perhaps so are some of the other townsfolk around here. He doesn’t like the idea.

“Anyway.” He clears his throat. “Hbomb. You want to have a *congressional debate* with the dragon?”

“Yep!” Hbomb looks far too excited at the idea. Wilbur tosses him a dice.

“Roll persuasion.”

It ends with a 3, and Wilbur takes a small, delighted satisfaction at watching Hbomb’s eager expression deflate.

“The dragon doesn’t care. It punts you across the face with a wing-” he rolls a dice here. *II*. “And you get a new, gouged scratch on your cheek. That’s minus 3 to health.”

Hbomb sinks into his seat with a vague grumble. Scott pats him lightly on the back.

“Wait.” Pete’s expression scrunches up. “Me and Phil aren’t humans. So does that mean we’ve been continuously breaking the national law the *entire* time too?”

Finally! He’s been wondering how long it would take them to notice.

“Absolutely!” Wilbur grins, waving a hand at the Section 23 legal document on the edge of their table.

“...Hbomb! You suggested taking our bounties to the authorities to redeem rewards!”

“Look, with you two in jail it would have meant more loot for me and Scott to split,” Hbomb protests. “I’m just playing it logically here.”

“We’re all such awful people, aren’t we?” Scott snickers. Wilbur tries not to let his breath hitch at the words. “Because I had caught that too.”

*Awful people-*

But there is no intent to the universe's invisible observance, no judgement or bend towards the justice so many fancy themselves the avatars of.

*Not today*, Wilbur thinks to himself, ensuring a vaguely tired grin rests loose on his expression.

"Who's making fun of who for stupid decisions now, huh?" Phil grins. "Should have joined me in the mountains."

"I was-" Pete scowls. "I don't have *wings*. I am a literal *slime*."

Wilbur chuckles. He eases his presence back into the warmth, the solidity of wood beneath him.

"Just jump in the ocean or something," Phil suggests. Pete rolls his eyes.

Time to move this along.

"Alright. Scott," Wilbur says. "Your turn. What do you do?"

"Tell the dragon I am gay," Scott says after a brief moment. "And that he would be homophobic if he tried to attack me. No one wants to be labeled homophobic."

"...roll a persuasion check."

It ends on a 20, because of course it does.

~\*~

Techno has been thinking.

He is always thinking - except when he is not, but that is why he has regrets. After each his resolve to think strengthens just a bit further.

So. Techno has been thinking.

That is what leads him to the only forge Sanctuary has to offer, and the woman who is currently hammering out a sword upon it.

A cutlass, curved to fine steel edges.

"Hello, Gem," he says. "Should I return another day, or have-

"I've got the steel sleeve casted," Gem says, glancing up for only a second. "The rapier I'm still working on, since the requirements you've given me are so specific. I can show you in a few minutes."

Techno nods. Then realizes she's not looking up from her work, so he mutters a "sure" and takes a seat on a nearby chair.

It is for a good while the sound of hammering and sizzling and more hammering accompanies them as Gem works the cutlass down to her standards. Time stretches in the realm of craftsmanship - that, Techno is familiar with.

Smithing is paradoxical, in many ways. The creation of a weapon, for the purpose of taking away another's ability to create similarly.

But that is the view angle someone like him would have, isn't it? How drenched is Techno in blood that all actions lead towards carnage? Not even death, but simple, suffering carnage?

After all, it is doubtful Gem crafts weapons in a number anywhere nearing the rows of scythes and hoes and other odd tools she has displayed in her shop, or circulating in use around Sanctuary. Techno, so far, has visited a forge almost always for the purposes of the blade. Including now.

That is not the purpose of most people. He knows this, and yet it is through these past few visits he has finally settled into this reality like winter's blanket of cold.

He knows a bit of the basics. How to keep a sword sharp and clean, ready to slice even bone. How to treat a metal's rust, how to hone and heat an edge and work out imperfections.

Always, for the blade.

His netherite pickaxe and axe, shimmering with enchantments, had been tucked into his hands by a hopeful looking Phil. What had he been hoping for?

That his son would realize the dance of blood through air is futile? That his son would use these tools to make something lasting of himself, like his father does with his monuments?

It is late to be thinking of such ideas. But it's not...

If the past year has taught Techno anything, it's that there is rarely a *too* late. Merely a *late* and *later*.

When should one cut their losses? Or should they ever? Perhaps it is always best to soldier on - this would be the most useful of all the meanings of the phrase, really.

It is some time later when Gem finally lowers her hammer upon a nearby slab of blackstone and straightens.

Techno takes this as the cue it is. He rises, and follows her to the far end of the room.

On a table there are steel shapes and objects, various parts of something or another Gem has been commissioned to make. She picks a cylindrical piece of steel and holds it out to Techno, who accepts without hesitation. It's light and cold in his hands.

Hollow as well, but unlike a normal cup-shape the inner walls are spirals of thin, sharp edges, like it was cast around a giant nail.

"Might take a little fiddling to fit on, but I made it according to your blueprints, so it'll work," Gem says. *Don't blame me if it's not the right size*, is the hidden message.

Techno nods, and carefully slips it into a cushioned section of his satchel.

"And the rapier?" he asks.

To this, Gem directs him to a cooling rack upon which a thin metal shape sits. Where there would normally be a hilt, the rapier instead tapers into a nail-shaped end, like the cylinder's inside inverted.

“There’s still a few bits to work out, but bring the cane here sometime after a week and I’ll get it fitted on,” she says. Techno nods.

That’s about all the business he needs to conduct today.

“And,” Gem adds as he begins his shuffles towards the door, “if you have any problems or extra additions you want me to do, better decide on it quickly afterwards. I won’t be in Sanctuary much longer.”

“Oh?” Techno asks. They shouldn’t run into any problems, or at least none Phil wouldn’t be able to fix, but the admission comes as rather a surprise.

Gem shrugs. “I got an invitation a while ago.”

Techno frowns. He thinks he’s missing something again.

“Invitation?”

“Yeah,” Gem says, now poking through one of her drawers with slight rustles. Something tight laces her next words. “Sanctuary’s been kind to me, but… sometimes there’s more for you than just your current place in the world, even if you have a nice thing going. And it’s my time to chase that more.”

*“It’s my time to chase the more, Techno.” Wilbur laughs, his fingers tight around Tommy’s shoulder. “Bluer skies, greener pastures - hope to see you on the other side!”*

*“Wilbur-”*

*But it was too late.*

Is it so bad, to want to make something of themselves in the world? To work for the betterment of their circumstances?

Do they know what they would define as *better*? As *more*?

Gem is still talking. Techno forces his mind back to the musty air of the room.

“After another month or so I’ll be packing up,” she hums. “Scott’s already found someone else to move in and take my spot, but I have no idea if they’ll be as good as me.”

She wipes her hands on a damp towel, and then adds, “probably not as good as me, actually. I wouldn’t normally blow my own horn like this, but - I did get that invitation!”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Techno says. He thinks he’s unsure what the “that” even is, but this conversation really has dragged on for long enough. “Um - thanks. Bye.”

At the doorway, however, he pauses and remembers one last thing. Words he should have said a long time ago, under such different circumstances. They’re late, perhaps too late, but… he might as well.

“Good luck,” Techno says. Gem blinks, looking somewhat startled. “I hope you’ll find yourself in a place better than the one you left.”

He’s gone before he can catch a reaction.

“Ice fishing?”

Hbomb nods, clearly enthused by Wilbur’s expressed interest.

“You said you really like fish, right? What about fishing?”

“It’s...” Wilbur tries to come up with a feeling around the activity. It’s surprisingly hard.

Techno and Phil had always been the ones doing the fishing, the food gathering, even most of the cooking.

Tommy too, though he delights in playing with the fish more than anything else. He has a strange ability to capture them live with only his hands and keep them there, thrashing for release as though in the talons of an osprey. They only ever seem to succeed in escape when Tommy allows them too.

Wilbur, meanwhile, enjoys the taste of fish. He also enjoys learning about fish, dissecting them, stripping them down to nothing but bone on one side, the color textured smooth as pearls. A pile of thin guts and perhaps eggs on the counter beside him, scales iridescent as butterfly wings arranged carefully on parchment paper.

He remembers he had a necklace of fish scales in one of their original homes, on that ship Phil captained or that cottage deep in the woods of north Pyserne, *before* the war. Before L’Manberg. He wonders what Phil’s done with his and Tommy’s old belongings that they left behind.

“I never did much fishing,” Wilbur says, to the empty space that expects a response. “Someone else usually provides me with the fish. But it’s okay, I guess.”

He pauses. “I’ve never tried ice fishing before. Might as well check it out.”

A sign of moving on is getting invested in something new, isn’t it? Though he’s not sure how “new” this qualifies as.

Wilbur once cradled his wanderlust like a precious flame that kept his heart steadily beating. The flame has long since been choked dead, stabbed and crushed and withered and splashed with more poison than he cares to remember.

The embers still remain, though. Tiny and pricked with red, firmly kept low with the weight of regret, but they still remain. Wilbur has no desire to keep them as anything but how they are now - tiny embers. The flame firmly snuffed.

Even so, it doesn’t mean he won’t welcome a slight change of scenery. Sanctuary’s borders are lines he has not explored before.

There’s just... more factors now.

“Where’s Techno?” Wilbur asks. He resolutely ignores the way his chest curls warm at the idea of his brother’s accompaniment. “Let’s bring him along too, I’m sure he’ll love a chance to crack some ice for fish.”

~\*~

They catch Techno exiting the blacksmith’s shop of all places, and when Wilbur tries to ask it is merely brushed off as business he’ll be told about later.

If Techno says he will tell later, then he will, so Wilbur contents himself with the security and invites him to Hbomb's supposed ice fishing endeavor.

There are several paths out of Sanctuary. The half cobbled road to the harbor is familiar, but this one which they are directed towards and leading into the woods south is not, as the mountain they reside on lies north of the town. It crunches cold like beads of ice beneath their boots, the soles and sides of which Phil recently added more padding as insurance that they're furred thick and steady around their feet.

Wilbur is warm in his clothes, the heavy weight enveloping. Soft wool presses nearly all his skin, down to the scarf knitted with wavy blue patterns tucked over his nose. The cloak trails soft, icy-fractal patterns in the snow behind them. He's almost too warm, actually.

The laughter and languish of the town stretches thinner and thinner as they continue towards the outskirts, just as the gravel beneath gives way to specks of dirt and snow-clung grass on the white path. The newest snowfalls have very clearly been shoveled out, as the ground of mostly-white holds firm beneath their weights.

They have passed many trees so far, but when they reach the forestline they *see* it. It is a line of trees, a wall of them, packed in the close fodder only a forest habitat can define, and just before that forest is a stretch of pure, near undisturbed white. No trees cross that space, save the occasional sapling springing with their uneven trunk, like a pup strayed too far from its pack.

It would be a nice meadow in the summertime, Wilbur thinks. There would be flowers, petals soft beneath his fingers, smelling of nectar and a tangerine sweetness almost too dense to bear. Tommy would love it.

He'll pick more flowers for Tommy when the winter is over.

"Why is there an empty piece of land between the forest and Sanctuary?" Techno asks. "This looks like a genocide on trees. Kinda rude to the trees, really - what have they ever done to you guys?"

"There's trees in Sanctuary," Wilbur points out. "Just not here."

Not in this clearly manmade meadow, unnatural despite how beautiful it might seem. The trees the edge hover like a congregation, each daring the others to lean further and further for the uncontested sunlight beyond forest boundaries. To test the limits of how far their audacity might take them before the axe finally strikes down.

"Remember how Scott maintains a spell that prevents monsters from knockin' on Sanctuary's doors?" Hbomb asks.

"Yes," Wilbur hums. "We also know most of your exports are gold and iron, from the unusually high numbers of monsters that spawn around here."

There is a connection. Wilbur ticks the pieces together a moment before Techno speaks.

"So the protection spell's radius ends at the treeline? Wait - no, it has to be smaller."

"On the south side, here, it ends a yard or two into the meadow," Hbomb says. "Our hunters go into that space with shields at sunset. The monsters spawn more in the forest, but they're all lured into the meadow by human presence, and then the hunters shoot them down."

“Nice system,” Wilbur offers. It’s efficient and makes good use of the town’s resources, and he’d bet it’s a lot safer than it sounds too.

“Anyway, we usually don’t bother in the winter.” Hbomb takes the lead again, continuing down the only path which cuts through the empty stretch of white, the shoveling work now clear in the towers of snow that reach higher than even Techno around them, still occasionally slipping in miniature avalanches.

“Don’t envy the people who had to do that,” Techno comments as they pass a particularly large pile on which someone has carved the image of a dick.

“I was one of those people,” Hbomb says. “You’re welcome.”

It is when the trees encase around them, sudden as a blanket swirled, that Wilbur hears the quiet.

Not the quiet of absolute nothingness, like how the void or high skies might feel, but instead the quiet of nature in hibernation. The quiet of a winter day where the world holds itself like ice across a lake, motionless and hushed.

The wind is still. Still, inert with its energy and content to its circumstance, so the lattice of branches above brush bare with only the faintest of clatters, when the occasional squirrel or songbird navigates around the chill in search of sustenance.

Their bootsteps on the printed snow, on upturned leaves that crackle with unshed purpose, feel like the greatest of all the current disturbances.

Wilbur does not know on any observational level how long it takes to reach the river. He only knows it can not have been too long, as Techno brings no complaints and instead begins testing the ice immediately.

They’ve both seen their fair share of rivers frozen in their march, pace slowed to glacial. The ice pale with colors from blue to the purest of white, mottled in streaks like clouds reflected from above. Just beneath are the lines, the fractals, the patterns of strange anomaly Wilbur has always wished to pry into.

Not now, though. Not today.

Today he lowers himself into seating against a tree, hands gloved thick and clasping around drawn up knees. Then he inhales a thin stream of air.

It pricks his throat like needles, but settles into the warmth of his body soon enough.

Techno and Hbomb have brought fishing rods, buckets. Wilbur has neither, and does not join when they begin re-breaking ice holes and casting.

That’s alright, though. It isn’t about the fish. His brother realizes as much when he extends an invitation and Wilbur declines with a soft shake of his head.

Instead he simply observes in the time they have, eyes half-lidded, the sound of winter quiet his almost-world entire. And for now, it is enough.



i decided it's been too long since ive written gratuitous nature imagery in this fic and elected to fix that immediately. so instead of wilbur introspection in the house, we get wilbur introspection in a *forest*. in the *winter*.

feedback in comments is always appreciated like usual and if you havent hit the kudos button 37 chapters in then,,,, uh

i reply to comments lives! [twitch](#)

[tumblr](#) and [twitter](#) for questions and art!

# i've got my own song to sing

## Chapter Notes

[discord](#) to get pings for updates/discuss stuff!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The winter season is, overall, uneventful. Or at least it is uneventful in the conventional sense - in that their heartbeats are steady, their nights are long and dream-visited, and the axis upon which their world rests spinning remain untilted from their previous angles.

Wilbur now sees not the purpose which he first viewed the mountains concealing - escape and prison all in one. There are other options at play. There always are.

The first flower, however, comes as a surprise.

One morning when Phil is sizzling tomatoes and beans for omelets while Techno sleeps in and Tommy chases Clementine around the house in faintly thudding steps, Wilbur ducks outside to catch the sunlight for a few chilly minutes.

He's greeted with banners of green - in the forest's newly budding leaves, in the wild grass and weeds and moss creeping up any boulder it can find. Snow hunches in clumps around them, small and glistening with water from their melt.

And when he steps down the porch and onto soft grass, he spies tiny blue flowers peaking from beneath stalks of green shade. Two ants march across a tiny curling petal, both diligently carrying something tiny and red in their jaws - defeated ladybugs, one with a leg still twitching in protest, soon food for the colony.

Wilbur smiles, though he feels a tint of melancholy to it. He would never be able to do something like that for his family, or at least not well enough to justify sending him out.

He rises up and lets the ants be. On the way back towards the porch, he's careful not to let the end of his cane disturb anything too much - especially now that the end is outfitted with a steel cylindrical shape that could crush something tiny without any resistance.

Techno hadn't been subtle at all with it.

*"But... why?" Wilbur asks, staring as Techno screws the metal end onto his cane. He has a suspicion - no, actually, he's pretty sure he knows for certain. Like maybe 99% certain.*

*"Well - the end of your cane goes through a lot of wear," Techno says. He frowns, and gives the edge of the metal a little tap. It makes barely a clinking sound. "Since you travel through ponds and wet mud and - sharp gravel sometimes. I don't want the wooden end to soften or rot and give out on you. So I'm adding a steel covering."*

*"Is that all?" Wilbur asks, and lets his amusement carry over. "This has nothing to do with my sudden increase in ability to bludgeon someone with a steel rod instead of a wood one?"*

*“Uh. No? I mean - yeah? But if you have a bit more time, you could have other options too.”*

*Wilbur’s eyes widen as Techno, in one smooth, strong motions, twists the top handlebar of his cane to reveal it now comes off - and attached to it is a long, glinting rapier that slots perfectly into the rest of the cane’s hollow interior.*

Not that he’ll ever have the chance to use the thing, if his family has any say on that. Wilbur allows himself a soft chuckle.

The sensation of his lungs humming in his chest brings an odd sort of delight.

They’ll probably start planting the seeds today. He can’t wait to tease Techno on his crop arrangements.

~\*~

It’s almost a surprise to them all, when Tommy’s birthday rolls around again. Phil knows at some point, birthdays become near obsolete.

The wonders of age.

But it is not today, not this one - Tommy is technically no longer a child, but he is still one to place a firm, if aware insistence on the date. (And isn’t that just a thought, that the youngest of his young who he once cradled in his wings like he was the world entire is now considered an adult by nearly all definitions?)

The idea of Tommy as an adult feels strangely right, however, despite the uneasy twinges that sometimes grip Phil’s heart. It feels... fitting.

After all, what is he but a child forced to grow up too fast? It’s like some redundant declaration of their societal ideal of adulthood - Tommy was not an adult, and now he is, but the story is so much more and wrong as ever.

Unlike his last birthday, there are no surprise gifts. They had sat down and agreed to that beforehand - somehow, from somewhere, they’ve all gathered the tendency to hoard, but there is no need to search high and low for mythical perfect presents when opportunity and circumstance are what dictates so much of it.

They all get up early that day (well, Phil and Tommy get up at their normal times. Techno and Wilbur drag themselves out of the room a few minutes later both looking like they’d just fought a nest of crows). It’s so they can all help with the breakfast, even Tommy, who insists on it.

Phil supposes there’s something comforting about the routine, the act of cooking and knowing where everything’s place is. He doesn’t fault Tommy for it.

That morning Techno also cuts Tommy snowflakes. Geometric snowflakes from his origami paper pile, and Wilbur sings more songs for him, songs about women and discs and one titled *There is a Green Bitch Who Will Always Be Homeless*. Tommy actually laughs when the lyrics come into play.

Afterwards they bake some muffins and a small cake, and make some sandwiches as well, which Phil packs away in his ender chest in preparation of what they’ve planned for the rest of the day.

Ranboo is waiting on the pier when they arrive. *The Camarvan* sways gently in the water beside him. A few other ships are tied and about, merchants and the occasional messenger vessel, but today there

is no interest for those.

“Ranboo!” Tommy breaks away from them first, cloak waving softly behind him. Phil can’t help a smile as he watches how Tommy’s steps almost bounce in the way he runs, air trailing behind.

“Hi!” Ranboo waves, jumping up and down. He has a wide grin similar to Tommy’s. “I got down here early and H helped me set up the ship!”

Tommy hugs him, tight, and then races up the plank and onto *The Camarvan*’s deck. It’s a small ship, clearly more for personal travel than anything else, but after Techno and Phil’s work it’s in good condition. Phil had overseen the last of the repairs himself, and ensured it.

“Alright, boys!” Tommy hollers. For a brief moment the wind picks up the sail and obscures his face from view. “Time to steal and stab some shit on the high seas!”

“I thought we were done with the war criminal stuff for now,” Techno says with a raised eyebrow, but he walks onto the deck and Wilbur follows, cane clicking. Phil and Ranboo go last, and they push the plank back onto the pier behind them.

Phil reminds himself to stay close to Wilbur, yet again. Tommy has his cloak and fireworks, and Techno can swim just fine, but Wilbur will not be able to prevent himself from drowning if anything happens.

He needs to keep an eye on Ranboo too. He has on special-made waterproof boots and clothing today, and water doesn’t hurt him as much as a normal enderman, but being dunked in the ocean would not be pleasant for him at all.

Wilbur, before he realizes, has untied the rope anchoring the ship to the pier.

Tommy whoops as the wind begins to raise them through the waters. Southeast, Phil notes.

“Watch out, ships! I’m coming to plunder your loot and bitches-”

“Please don’t target the ones coming to Sanctuary,” Ranboo sighs. “The council will be mad we’re messing with their economy.”

“When did we agree to become pirates?” Wilbur asks, sounding mildly alarmed. Phil throws an arm around his shoulders, and tries not to laugh.

~\*~

Rather predictably, the wind continues to take them southeast. Techno isn’t too worried about it - they have oars and he can tack against the wind well enough. They even have room to sleep on or below the deck for a night, though hard wood is rather annoying to spend a night on. Maybe they can drag out some wool from their ender chest, which Phil has brought along.

Worst case scenario, annoying as it would be, Phil can just grab the ropes tied to the ship's mast and drag them back to Sanctuary with his flight.

Being on the seas is a nice feeling. There’s something about the fluidity of its motions that grant him a cover land never could - the idea that neither him or potential enemies will ever have a plan guaranteed to succeed with the waters hiding its mysteries from all.

Techno revels in the best laid plans, but he performs even better when competing with his enemies in adaptability.

Today is not a day of war and enemies, however, so Techno digs through the ender chest Phil has set down beside the mast and pulls out a fishing rod, enchantments high as he could finagle them the night before. Unfortunately, *Lure 7* still eludes him.

“Might catch some good ocean fish today,” Techno hums. “Get some variety.”

“I would love to make some dishes with cod or tuna again,” Phil says, though he seems content to sit with his hair parted against the salt-sprayed wind, Wilbur beside him quietly humming an ancient tune.

Techno is about to respond with some remark about age and old bones when his lure bobs down. Quick as a leopard he jerks, reels, and pulls.

A minute later they have a fish the length of Techno’s arm and torso combined, flopping desperately on the deck, scales reddish brown and glinting.

“Halibut,” Techno muses. “I think.”

“It’s a species of halibut,” Wilbur confirms. “A young one, too.”

“Too young for your tastes?” Tommy asks. Wilbur takes a moment to flip him off before turning back to Techno.

“So are we keeping it? Saving it somewhere?”

Techno takes a moment to think before moving to drag over a large barrel, one of a few he had thought to leave on deck when he had been making repairs. It only takes a bit of effort to throw the halibut into the barrel, and then fill it with water.

It doesn’t even have room to turn its body. Techno somehow feels a little bad for it, which is ridiculous, considering the mass amount of animals he’s murdered to feed his family. And for... various other reasons.

“That’s enough meat for all of us tonight,” Phil says. “Though we might not make it back in time to make dinner.”

“I’m sure someone in Sanctuary will take it,” Ranboo offers. “Might invite you for a feast, actually.”

“Maybe,” Techno says. He casts his bobber and sits down on the warm deck. “Ranboo, I have a spare rod. Want to give fishing a try?”

He pauses, and glances around. “Unless you want to join Tommy in... communing with the sea spirits, or whatever he’s doing.”

“I am *enjoying the ocean air*; you fucking prick.”

“Oh, right!” Phil perks his head up. “Tommy, the air currents over the ocean are really different from the ones in the mountains. I can show you!”

Tommy wastes no time pulling out rockets from a pouch on his belt.

With some unspoken conversation between, Phil gives the rest of them a wave and swoops into the air in a stroke of black. Tommy floofs out his cloak, salutes, and follows with a sharp whistle and faint white plume of smoke.

“Well,” Ranboo says. “Techno, can I have that spare fishing rod?”

~\*~

They catch quite a few more fish, which they try to identify the species of and some of which Wilbur spends a few minutes poking and prodding, before they’re all released back into the ocean. There’s no way they can justify keeping more than one, now that winter isn’t here to keep spoilage, and it’s not as if they can eat more in a day.

“Have you ever played solitaire?” Wilbur asks Ranboo sometime during the lull, when Tommy and Phil are distant specks chasing each other in the sky above.

Techno could join them. Wilbur’s not sure why he doesn’t.

“I... think I vaguely know what that is?” Ranboo blinks. “Why?”

Wilbur grins. He shuffles out a deck from a cloak pocket. “I’m sure your reflexes are good enough to reel in a fish even if you’re a little distracted. Come on, I need harder opponents than my family.”

Techno groans.

“He just barely escaped an alcohol addiction, you don’t need to give him a gambling one.”

“I mean - I’ll be going back to the potential alcohol addiction soon anyway,” Ranboo laughs, though there’s a tint of uneasiness that’s all too familiar.

After all, Tommy has a choice in when he returns to New L’Manberg. Ranboo doesn’t. The country will be expecting him in the White House by the end of the year.

Wilbur knows the pressure all too well.

For not the first time, he wonders why Ranboo of all of Hypixel’s champions was chosen as the wedding candidate to Tubbo. Perhaps they thought that if the marriage had to involve a child, it would be better to have both of the pairing as children. He’s not sure whether or not he agrees.

The candidate wouldn’t have been considered terribly important, to waste on a nation new and tiny, ready to fall apart from forces internal and external. But Ranboo couldn’t have been some bottom-rank scraping nobody either - it was, regardless of circumstances, an alliance marriage with another nation, even one like New L’Manberg.

Important, but not important enough to not risk.

Tubbo must have been so deeply uncomfortable when he signed an agreement to marry someone he’s never met and knows nothing of, and even more so at the wedding itself. And he must have known too, back then, that any sort of divorce will cause an international scandal that jeopardizes the entirety of New L’Manberg’s foreign relations, even if it happens after he steps down from presidency.

Some people are willing to make such great sacrifices for their nations, their ideals... their families. Wilbur wonders how much further Tubbo is willing to go.

He has a feeling there may be no limit.

Techno reaches to place a hand on Ranboo's shoulder. "Don't worry, I hid Wilbur's alcohol stash from him in Pogtopia. I can do it again for you and Tubbo."

"You did?" Ranboo glances between Wilbur and Techno, eyes suddenly wide.

Wilbur winces. He's nearly forgotten that.

"I was really mad at the time," he admits. "But of course I'm relieved he did now."

Fuck, if his family had been forced to deal with *withdrawal* on top of everything else for him... Wilbur has nightmares about that, sometimes. His throat burning, heartbeats irregular as his tempo, as the world spinning around him.

He's dipped dangerously into addiction before. He has no desire to start down that path again.

"Can't stay forever, but I know we can help a bit," Techno says. "We've agreed on that, right?"

He seems suddenly thoughtful.

"Yeah," Wilbur says. "Whatever gives Tommy some peace of mind. And you now, I guess."

"Oh." Ranboo is silent, and then he takes a deep breath. "Uh - thanks."

"Your lure is bobbing," Techno says.

"What - oh!"

Wilbur begins setting up his solitaire game.

~\*~

When Tommy finally decides to loosen himself from the currents and glide back onto *The Camarvan*, it's because he spies another ship in the distance.

It's not the green and white flag of a Dream SMP ship - the SMP never did much business in the Novixic Ocean even before the L'Manberg Revolution, but now that its few western coasts are New L'Manberg territory, Tommy's heard trade from them - at least state tracked and sponsored trade - is near extinct.

They're more focused on their eastern territories now. Which is good for Tubbo.

But no, the ship that catches his eyes isn't one of the Dream SMP, as much as Tommy wishes it is. Instead flies the flag of Manifold, an established ally.

Tommy's met Jack Manifold, its current leader, a few times at political gatherings. In all of them, he's shown himself to be exceedingly boring.

But. This is not about Jack Manifold or even his country, Manifold, beside the mountains. This is about...

Having fun. Right. Having fun and wrecking shit, and he would be completely fine if he didn't do what he's planning to do - but why wouldn't he when the opportunity is right there?

Tommy swoops back down, and eventually locks target onto the gradually growing sight of *The Camarvan*. His brothers and Ranboo turn to give him curious expressions when he lands.

Wait, is that a game of fucking solitaire Wilbur's playing with Ranboo? Fuck, no one needs another gambling addiction. He'll have to talk to Wilbur about it sometime - and there's no way he'll say no to any requests.

Nowadays, to have Wilbur agree to anything, all Tommy needs to do is ask and maybe look a bit sad if the request is something particularly ridiculous, like trying to paint with Wilbur's hair as a canvas. (That attempt went even worse than Tommy had expected.)

Sometimes, when something was granted of Tommy too easily, too quickly by Wilbur, he thinks about swallowing his words, shutting up, and shaking him back into the Wilbur he once knew. The Wilbur who explained to Tommy why something was stupid, but also how they could think of better ideas, all with a grouchy patience that lets Tommy know all he wants is to keep them safe, and who still indulges him when he can.

That Wilbur is gone now, dead as L'Manberg's purpose. Here is a man so different, but who loves Tommy still. They'll have to make it work somehow, eventually.

"Hello, my minions," Tommy says when he finally finds the words to speak. "I have spotted a target awaiting plunder!"

"Are we really doing this pirate thing?" Wilbur asks. His eyes are actually a bit wider than usual. "I thought it was a joke!"

"We can have some fun with this, even if it's just for today," Phil says, landing beside Tommy. His wings fold back neatly, almost like obsidian given movement in the sunlight's glint. He must have just preened them again before they got on the ship.

"It's a ship from Manifold," Tommy says. "Every bit of tax that country doesn't get means a slightly weaker ally for Dream."

"You just want an excuse to threaten people and steal stuff," Techno says. "Attacking a random shipping vessel that's probably mostly empty by now won't do much of anything."

Tommy grins, and flashes him a thumbs up, because Techno's not wrong and he has no qualms admitting it.

Techno sighs. "What direction? I'll see if I can get the sail up."

~\*~

Trapping and ransacking the merchant ship turns out to be easier than Tommy anticipated. Way easier.

It helps that the Dream SMP's forces aren't breathing down their neck.

First, Techno reaches into the ender chest and pulls out *Rocket Launcher*, which makes Ranboo's eyes grow to the size of large grapes. Then, Techno outfits fireworks onto them.

It's simply a matter of getting close to the ships and letting loose. There's yells, pained shouts - and then a few horrible, wailing screams, which likely means the rockets had set some people on fire.



Tommy definitely sees a part of the ship's railing flare into red flames before a spindly shape scrambles over and douses it with seawater.

Pretty quickly, the ship raises white flags. Tommy tries not to laugh when the ship's captain realizes their attackers are 5 strange men on a vessel 3 times smaller, but he doesn't have enough time to talk before Tommy leaps the remaining distance between their ships and holds a knife against his throat.

He's pretty sure he's not actually going to kill the captain. Unless he does something really dumb.

The first words out of Tommy's mouth are a threat.

"How about you hand us all your good stuff, and all of *you* get to sail off alive?" Tommy asks, grin sharp as Philza's.

Techno's crossbow is narrowed at the rest of the crew from him behind as well, he's aware, more rockets loaded and ready.

The captain's eyes trail sideways - to a blackened husk of a man on the far end of the ship, Tommy realizes. The head is a dark lump that looks seconds away from crumbling into ash, attached to the rest of the charred body by a thin, twiggy line.

Ouch. That could not have been a nice way to die. At least it looks like it was pretty quick - a rocket must have hit him straight on.

"Well, most of you get to sail off alive," Tommy amends.

They end up receiving a few crates of mushrooms, hemp fibers, and paper out of the entire situation, everything else too small and insignificant for Tommy to decide to bother with. Phil, with a cloak back around his wings, is who actually ends up moving most of the crates, giving Tommy the occasional amused look as he passes them.

They can use the mushrooms, and especially the fibers and paper, though they'll probably end up selling some off to the rest of Sanctuary.

Tommy holds the captain at swordpoint the entire time, and when he finally sheathes it in one smooth motion he immediately somersaults into a backflip onto *The Camarvan's* deck.

The other ship wastes no time sailing off, crew practically falling over themselves.

"Has your pirate desire been satiated yet?" Wilbur asks once they're out of sight, mast finally gone from the horizon line.

"I want to do it again, but to Dream," Tommy informs him back. Which means *yes, that was fun, but it's probably not happening sometime soon again.*

Phil grins, yawns, and lays out on the deck, wings almost flopping over the edges of the railings on either side of him.

"This is nice sunlight," he says. "I'm gonna take a snooze here - wake me when we're going back."

"Our maiden voyage, and Dadza Dearest is *taking a nap*," Wilbur laughs.

"Technically not a maiden voyage," Techno says. "This ship used to have a name before you guys took over and everything-"

*“Technically,”* Wilbur imitates. “Oh look, I-”

“I’m going to join Dadza in the nap,” Tommy announces loudly, because that is true. The summer sun is nice and warm today, on the smoothly rolling waves, the amount of deck space left just comfortable enough for him to drag himself onto one of Phil’s wings and close his eyes, body sprawled. One of his arms ends up resting on Phil’s stomach.

Phil makes a mildly confused noise at that, but the edge of his wing curls to encompass Tommy’s torso like an embrace. The feathers brush soft as morning sunlight down his cheek.

“Aww,” Wilbur whispers, just faint enough for Tommy to hear as he feels his mind drift towards the haze of sleep. He musters just enough will to flip him off, before collapsing his arm back down and letting the warmth flood over him.

He just barely catches Wilbur’s noise of mock outrage. It brings an easy grin to his mouth.

## Chapter End Notes

finally, after 32 chapters, sbi are back on the seas! remember when this fic had 6 chapters? haha ‘cause i dont lmao

also yes there was a point to the whole pirate thing (it's mostly just a one off thing sbi indulge tommy in, though. dont expect a pirate arc, beyond tommy being a terrifying harassment when he can)

feedback always welcome, as always!

i reply to comments lives! [twitch](#)

[tumblr](#) and [twitter](#) for questions and art!

# the world above, darkened amber

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

They all have some affinity for the seas, really. Wilbur has always been fond of exploration, of maps and mysteries beyond the horizon. Phil is a wanderer by heart. Techno enjoys the thrill of the ocean's challenges, cataloguing piece after piece of information to weave together theories on the currents and wildlife that dwells beneath.

Even Ranboo gets along with the waters well enough, as long as he has his protections and keeps distance from *The Camarvan*'s wet railings.

Tommy - well. Something in Tommy's heart draws to the night in the far. Where New L'Manberg - or more specifically, Tubbo, resides.

That is still a while away, however, so after the first sailing expedition they tie *The Camarvan* to the docks and head back home to lounge and rest and care for their chickens and crops.

The day afterwards, Tommy takes the path to the woods behind their home again. This time, Clementine trots beside him, tail wagging as always. She was a tiny puppy this time last year, and so all the new sights and smells of mid-April in that fleeting space between the clawed grasp of winter and the beating heat of summer are new to her.

It is well known to Tommy, this route. The craggled stump at this bend, the hawk's nest at least a few years old at the other. A chipmunk darts before him, and Clementine pounces, just barely missing. When she rises back up with a whine, her nose is wetted with grass and a shiny black beetle flickering its shelled wings.

Tommy laughs and brushes it all off with a flick of his hand. Then, he leads her on towards the clearing.

The mooblooms are in bloom again. Surprisingly resilient flowers, he's learned. He kneels down, watches dew gather around the bases of their warming leaves and buds, dripping down their stems. A few have tiny ladybugs crawling up their sides, in the sheltered walls of petals soft like velvet.

He spies a few bees as well, purpled sides and gossamer wings.

"s nice, isn't it?" Tommy whispers quietly. "Our own little world."

Clementine sniffs one of the flowers, sneezes loudly, and then trots back to lay down beside Tommy, nose still twitching.

The trees hum with the murmur of spring, like soft rainfall and wind with the birdsong.

Back in L'Manberg, people had always told Tommy to take a walk when the stress was getting to him.

*"If the paperwork's getting to you, then take a walk!" they'd say. "Get some fresh air! Give your mind a break and the stress will go away!"*

It never worked for him. Walking the streets of L'Manberg only ever seemed to make his stress worse. He would be slapped with the sight and sounds of people struggling with their lives and problems, closing shops and cupping war wounds, begging for money or pensions or assistance of any kind.

Problems he and Wilbur were supposed to fix.

Then, thoughts of how he, or Wilbur, could possibly uphold the responsibility would always flood his mind like a swarm of wasps, each stinging with poison vitriol. Scenarios of how everything could stay just as bad, or get worse - horribly, horribly worse. In a way, it did.

Pogtopia *was* that worse. Not just for his relation with Wilbur - Tommy *couldn't* take a walk outside the ravines without imagining a bolted, poison-tipped crossbow in every shadow. Every crunch of leaves became an attack waiting to strike, and the sun itself seemed to be working against him, traveling twice as fast as it should across the sky so the monsters could sooner manifest and claw him to shreds.

Tommy thought he would always hate the idea of taking a walk to clear his head.

But, curled on the grass, near the mooblooms and Clementine's wiggling body, with the forest shading his skin from the harshest of the sunlight - Tommy thinks he finally understands what those people had meant.

~\*~

They go on more sailing trips with *The Camarvan*, drifting the ocean aimlessly while Techno fishes and Wilbur jokes and sings. Tommy occasionally dives into the water, and delights in swimming with the current beneath as well as above. Techno's pretty sure he's given more than a few fish nightmares.

It's like their ravine game nights, but in the sunlight and on the waters. If nothing else, it's a nice change of pace. Of scenery.

But it is a few weeks after Tommy's birthday, when the winds are more favorable for southward travel, that they finally begin planning for a longer kind of expedition.

"Since we have the ship, we might as well take advantage of it," Techno had said. Since it was too risky for Wilbur to use elytras for long distance travel, they might as well just sail.

The destination picked over a large map is a city 200 leagues to the south of Sanctuary, known for its spring carnivals and displays of rare animals or artefacts. It should take around a week or so to get there, and in the end it is decided that Techno and Tommy will go.

Wilbur asked to stay behind, citing more interest for their homestead and Sanctuary's offerings for now - which Techno suspects is related to the handcrafted dice, character sheets, and faux-historical documents for made up nations that have steadily grown in number in their shared room over the past few months.

He might ask to join their next campaign.

Wilbur staying behind means Phil does as well, but when Tommy asks Ranboo he rather eagerly takes them up on the offer.

"Sanctuary's pretty great, but I like changes of scenery as well," he explains.

Hbomb had seen them off with the warning to not lose him, “or New L’Manberg and Hypixel will try to have your heads. When they realize they can’t kill you two, then they’ll have *my* head.”

It makes Techno wonder, for the first time, how *Hbomb* of all people became Ranboo’s supposed guardian around here. He must have been trustworthy enough to Tubbo, but beyond being one of the ridiculous number of foreign mercenaries and bands of old war troops that had ended up helping them in the Battle of Manberg, he can’t see what could have been done to gain that trust.

Then again, New L’Manberg can face the Dream SMP without getting completely squashed now, which has been an almost alarmingly quick development. Rarely has a country managed to recover and mobilize so quickly - though Techno supposes the pieces had already been there for them. Tubbo mainly has to coordinate and put it all together.

That’s a question for another time, and probably something Wilbur will bring up and not him. Techno doesn’t like asking these questions, fascinating as they are. Maybe it’s another thing he’s supposed to “work on”.

They pack food for the trip, dried fruits and vegetables, and water in the barrels. They make sure they have clothing and money and tools - and Techno has an ender chest he barely uses because they’re always so close to Phil’s nowadays, which finally gets plopped down below deck as well.

Tommy spends a good half hour deciding which blankets and pillows to bring while Phil carries their supplies onto the ship’s deck, including bamboo mats for them to sleep on during the journey. In the end, he has Ranboo decide for him, which Techno suspects he regrets after Ranboo grabs Wilbur’s pink and red blanket and stuffs it into Tommy’s arms with a grin, as well as another one that’s dark green and striped with black.

That one belongs to Phil, though he lets it go with merely a huff.

So, eventually, they have their route planned out and supplies prepared, and *The Camarvan* is drifting down the coast. Techno catches just a glimpse of the stretch of meadow that borders Sanctuary’s south before the mountains and forests obscure their view once more.

“Well,” Ranboo says about 10 minutes in. “Who wants to play solitaire?”

~\*~

He’s less eager to play after Tommy destroys him a few times, after which they both agree to switch to poker.

Techno, meanwhile, mentally prepares his defence for when people question why the two children in his care have a sudden gambling addiction.

~\*~

“Would you rather be a mining slave on Hypixel, or in a hybrid zoo in Manifold?”

Ranboo turns his head, considering. “Probably zoo. Easier to escape. Also, I get free food and just have to look interesting in the meantime.”

“Honestly, most people would be pretty content with a zoo’s standards,” Techno comments. “When you really think about it. Free food, home, and no work?”

“Techno!” Tommy whirls to him with a grin.

This is the first time Techno's spoken since their game began, and he's already regretting it.

"Techno, would you rather kill a man or a woman?"

Techno stares, deadbeat. "I'm not answering that."

Tommy and Ranboo both pout, and turn to face each other again.

"Okay," Ranboo says. "Would you rather... eat Schlatt's corpse, or eat Dream's corpse?"

"Ew-" Tommy scrunches up his nose. "I mean - we don't know how Dreams even work biologically, so maybe eating him would make me grow an extra arm or turn green. Or just fucking die. Schlatt would be normal cannibalism, so I guess Schlatt."

Ranboo nods. "I would nibble on a bit of Dream if I got the chance though. I bet he tastes like whale blubber."

"I - where the fuck did you get that idea from?"

~\*~

The winds are favorable the first day. Techno has to do little except open and close the large sail on *The Camarvan*, and occasionally do a bit of rowing to steer in the right direction.

An eye has to be kept out for potential, actual pirates - a vessel small as theirs appears as an easy target, after all. Trade is lucrative on Novixl's coasts if one does it right, but the lack of overall authority means that for every merchant ship there is another awaiting the right opportunity to threaten and plunder.

*Rocket Launcher*, as well as *Orphan Obliterator*, are strapped to his belt for a reason.

But the seas are quiet, and the ships he glimpses show no indication of wanting to do any unsavory business.

Techno counts the seabirds, as they pass by. Terns and gulls and pelicans, the occasional albatross. They all remind him of Phil and Wilbur.

~\*~

*You know, Tommy, the order to capture you on sight is still there in the Dream SMP, but Dream's pretty much stopped actively trying to look for you. I think he realizes you're not anywhere he'll be able to find you, at least not by sheer luck.*

*It's really weird. Anyway, Secare and our other territories are settling in nicely, though there's some conflict over immigration of hybrids to other New L'Manberg areas. Secare's leaders are kind of upset that we're "taking their labor force" or something. We do need the region's crop growth, and they've got an established system in place that would take a long while to shift, so I've signed laws limiting the flow of immigration from Secare to the rest of New L'Manberg for now.*

*I've already replaced a few leaders, though. The ones that get the most annoying about promoting Secare's independant rights over New L'Manberg's wellbeing. Though to be fair, most of Secare would haven chosen complete independence over New L'Manberg if they could. It's mostly the ones who don't hide it well enough.*

*Yes, I know how bad that all sounds. But the concept of being a good guy or bad guy is completely moot in running a country anyway, besides public perception. What am I supposed to do, let a major food supply potentially collapse?*

*I promise I'm working on a lot of things. Some of which you would approve of. A lot.*

*Niki gave me some banana cookies today. I've only had a few bananas before - Hypixel had some at the wedding feast. They were alright. The cookies are really delicious though. When you and Ranboo come back, I'd like you to have some.*

~\*~

Tommy tucks the letter back into the ender chest, and quietly pulls out another one to reread.

~\*~

The skies are clear the first night, and there are no insects this far out in the sea, so when the darkness comes they roll their mats out and prepare to sleep beneath the stars.

Tommy looks almost entranced when he gazes up - the angle from the bedroom windows back home doesn't exactly show off the sky clearly, and they were usually indoors an hour before the first stars came out. He must have not had a clear, unbroken view of the sky in a while.

Though something in his eyes seems to stare into points more distant than even the glittering dots above. Techno wonders if it's linked to the sea. Years-old conversations have been rising back into his mind recently.

Ranboo, meanwhile, just yawns. He's the first of them to fall asleep, just a few minutes after the mats are rolled out beneath a green blanket dotted with fuzzy bees.

Techno stays up to press against Tommy, who is still watching the night sky with something focused, something vast. A curiosity with no strings attached, no fear in his loose grip or calculation lurking behind his eyes of how he can hold any information hostage.

It's a simpler curiosity, wondrous to behold. Techno takes a few moments to savor it, hold the memory close. He hopes he'll remember.

"You're not mad about having to go back to New L'Manberg in a few months, are you?" Tommy suddenly asks.

Techno takes a long, long minute to consider the question.

"Mad at... you?"

Tommy bites his lip.

"Maybe. Or at Tubbo. Or New L'Manberg."

"Well," Techno exhales. "It's not exactly on my list of hot tourist destinations to visit. But I'm not mad - maybe mildly irritated at the whole idea, but it's nothing towards you."

After a silence too long, he adds, "it's just mild irritation because I'll be back in the country and have to constantly keep a low profile around so many people."

Tommy looks away - or tries to, but Techno is seized by a sudden bolt of fear in his chest. He reaches to stay the movement, placing a hand on Tommy's shoulder.

"Tommy," Techno says. What are the words he wants to say again? "Tommy, uh - it's not like that. It's nothing you should feel bad or guilty or - or angry about. I think. I promise, I'm not mad or annoyed at you for this and neither is Wilbur."

"I'm putting you and Wilbur in danger by going back," Tommy whispers.

"You're putting yourself in danger too," Techno points out. "But you're still willing to do it because you care about Tubbo."

He hesitates. *You studied argumentative structure and tactics. Think.*

"It's like - you probably don't like the idea of bein' so close to Dream and New L'Manberg's politics again either," he finally says. "Right?"

"Yeah," Tommy mumbles.

"And you think those things are annoying, and maybe you're mad at Dream, and you feel overall irritated about dealing with those concepts. Or just negative about it."

Tommy doesn't respond this time. Knowing himself, Techno might have just completely misread the situation. But he barrels on regardless.

"But you're not mad at Tubbo for it, even though you're goin' back to New L'Manberg for Tubbo. You think it's fully worth it for Tubbo. Probably no hesitation at all on that."

"I..." Tommy shifts to lean a bit closer to Techno. "Yeah. I guess."

"That's how we feel about this, but with you," Techno says. "I mean - I can't call you an annoying little brother if I'm not willing to follow you into these situations, you know?"

Tommy nods. Techno knows that they're both aware of that idea, so painfully well.

When one of them calls, the rest will come to help. They have to. That's what brothers are for. Techno wonders, sometimes, if Tommy or Wilbur think it has been worth it.

He thinks it has been, despite everything.

"And Wilbur feels the same way?" Tommy whispers. Techno smiles back. Something painful strains both their expressions, and they know why.

"Tommy, of course he does. You know that better than anyone else."

Tommy nods. He drags the pink blanket up, around his shoulders. An edge flutters gently to the night wind.

The seas are calm tonight, and close to the shore. Techno had thought about taking watch, but that's probably unnecessary. He'll wake if he hears something, and his weapons are close by.

"I think I'm gonna go sleep now," Tommy says. "Can you..."

He pushes his mat to border the sleeping figure of Ranboo.



Techno nods, and pushes his own mat to border Tommy's. He actually lies down first, and then Tommy is down and tilting his head against Techno's shoulder. A weight warm and cradled like it fits - not perfectly, because there is no such thing - but comfortably. Steadily. Safely.

Tommy slings an arm close and holds his hand down on one of Techno's, almost holding. Techno tugs the blankets over them both just as the rise and fall of Tommy's chest evens out.

They're all quiet sleepers, though Tommy wasn't once like this. Once, his snores were loud enough to wake Wilbur, whose room was right beside his. Wilbur would then complain about it all morning long, while Tommy laughed unrepentantly from the dining table with some mashed potatoes or scrambled eggs and salad half eaten on the plate before him.

War must have trained that habit out of him quick. Techno watches his expression, serene and smiling, for another few minutes before turning his head up.

The stars sail ever so imperceptibly across the void above, with their unpatterned winks. They don't understand anything, don't know of the world - but their presence somehow comforts Techno regardless. He yawns quietly, with his gaze relaxed and fuzzed around the edges, Tommy's hand still over his.

Soon, he falls asleep thinking he hasn't seen a night sky so beautiful in a very, very long time.

## Chapter End Notes

have slept on a bamboo mat, can confirm it is very pog. probably feels different on a rocking ship but still pog.

a lot of people mentioned in the comments last chapter how Tommy doing his whole pirate thing would attract dream's attention, to which i ask, how? is that any way likely? like not only are people from Manifold, who are allies and not part of the SMP likely to not be that invested in a random search for a child that disappeared 18 months ago, former New L'Manberg founder or not... like think of how far that information would have to travel and how reliable it must sound.

random merchant from manifold: okay so our ship got attacked by pirates

random other person, maybe someone who oversees trade or banking in that merchant's city: sorry for your loss, please join the list of... 495 other merchant ship owners applying for compensation due to piracy-related loss

random merchant from manifold: the main attacker looked really young and had blond hair and blue eyes. Also there was this guy with pink hair with them, and an enderman hybrid

random other person: ah, so the attackers were a multinational group and likely not sponsored by an enemy country's navy.

Well, in that case I'm sorry, you likely won't be able to claim compensation-

random merchant from manifold: aww damnit. you know, i thought the attackers looked kinda familiar...

random other person: ...sir, there is a giant line behind you, and I'm supposed to address their concerns. Are you done?

random merchant from manifold: yeah yeah, sorry. bye.

See what you guys need to get is that in this au, hybrids are not super rare, and piracy is like... super prevalent. As it has been for much of irl history, including modern day in many places without proper governmental presence.

There's also a lot of people who look similar to Tommy, who already looks very different from the painting of him in uniform after 18 months recovering away from New L'Manberg. He's grown like - physically too. More than normal, even :)

Hbomb didn't recognize Wilbur after 8 months or however long it was. Do you think some random merchant from Manifold, a country not really involved with New L'Manberg and only vague allies with the Dream SMP, would realize who Tommy is?

Techno didn't have his mask, but because his public images are only of him with a mask, long pink hair isn't that weird either. Especially since pirates tend to make fashion choices that denote they're not aligned with any particular national identity.

And also, Dream gets like a dozen reports of people supposedly seeing where Tommy is every day. Even if he takes this (rather dubious, from a logical perspective) claim with any merit... like it's a random ship near Novixl's coast. How the fuck is he supposed to connect that with Sanctuary when there's literally tens of thousands of settlements along that coast? Basically yeah there's just... theres no way Tommy doing that would set anyone off. Remember that they are living in a world that doesn't revolve around them, and consider things in the larger context.

also yeah shorter chapter but any of the next few planned scenes here would have messed with the pacing a bit so here ya go. early update whoo?

# an open sky, free of clouds

## Chapter Notes

[discord](#) to get pings for updates/discuss stuff!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It is hot. Ridiculously so, to the point where earlier in the day Techno had swapped his normal dress shirt with a short sleeved one and switched to thinner linen pants as well.

Ranboo quickly followed suit, and so had Tommy, but his cloak had stayed on.

He'd felt a fierce burst of attachment when Ranboo suggested taking it off, which is strange and maybe a bit unsettling. Tommy's not sure. Should he be feeling so attached to an article of clothing? So possessive, that he feels the need to wear it all the time?

He knows the cloak's benefits - on a practical level, it can get him out of a hell lot of situations, and he's learned it's usually better to run from the danger than to engage (and fuck honor or glory or the supposed downfalls of cowardice, because the people who cared most about those ideals had been the ones whose dead bodies he was most likely to stumble over on the battlefield).

And maybe it means even more sentimentally. That's alright. He's - he should be allowed to like things in that way, as long as it doesn't cloud his judgement, like... like how the discs did.

It's alright, though. He's told himself this before and he will continue to. It's alright.

Arguably, the cloak means even more to him than the discs did. It's a physical reminder, every day, that Phil cared enough to go through the trouble of planning the project, gathering all the materials, weaving the fabric, sewing it together, and applying the enchantments.

Tommy knows it must have taken a long fucking time, the kind of thing he once would have never had the patience for, even if he wanted to commit.

Maybe it's different now. He's changed.

*"Very specific," he imagines Techno's voice huffing in his ear. "What a wonderful assessment of your character. Over the course of time, you - gasp! - changed! How revolutionary!"*

Tommy stares at the cloudy fabric gathered in his one hand, his other on the clasp that pools it around his neck.

A bead of sweat drips down his cheek.

Sighing, he undoes the clasp. Why the fuck is the weather so hot around here? He swears Sanctuary never got this bad even during the hottest of summer days last year, and halfway up a mountain the temperature feels at most like a pleasant spring morning compared to... *this*.

Tommy folds the cloak and tucks it carefully into his satchel, until only a line of pale blue is showing. They should be arriving at the city soon - Risenulf, it's called. Tommy supposes he's heard worse.

Ranboo watches, closer to *The Camarvan*'s railings than usual, the excitement outweighing the sting of occasional droplets. His tail lashes just barely above the pale deck, tufted end bushy and silky, newly brushed. Techno stands beside him.

Tommy hefts his satchel close, and gets up to join them.

~\*~

They arrive at midday, the sun full of glaring white hotness from above. Tommy wishes he could shoot it down for just a few hours.

The sail is quickly lowered once the algae-worn piers come into view, and they row the rest of the way. Two men stand to greet them on the dock, beside the harbor they're gliding into. Techno rises, slowly, as *the Camarvan* comes to a smooth and steady halt.

"What is your business in Risenulf?" one of men ask, clipboard in hand. The other has sword sheathed, crossbow strapped, both glimmering with enchantments. They're in uniforms of light blue, tailored short for the summer heat.

"Leisure," Techno says. His tone is clipped and formal, but polite, a combination Tommy rarely ever hears from him. If he imagines hard enough, he could almost mistake for Wilbur's "politician" voice.

For a second, something startled flashes in Ranboo's expression. Tommy peers to him curiously, but he's given a dismissive wave, so he shrugs back and turns back to Techno.

"For the festivities?" the man is asking. He's writing on his clipboard, though Tommy knows better than to assume it's anything actually informative.

"Yes," Techno says. He inclines his head to Tommy and Ranboo. "These are my brothers. We're not planning to stay more than five days."

"Really?" the other man asks. "You'll miss the tournament."

Techno's expression remains unchanged, still as stone, but the men must have gotten from the questioning glances Tommy and Ranboo send each other that they're unaware of what he had meant.

"There's a tournament being hosted at Risenulf," he explains. "Gonna start in 3 days, deadline to sign up in 2. Tournament of the Flowers, it's called."

"For what? To find the ultimate gardener?" Tommy asks. He lets some skepticism drip into the words.

"Battle tournament," Techno answers before the man can. "1 verses 1 fights, winner advances to the next round, until 1 person is crowned Champion of the Flowers. It's a yearly thing - didn't realize this one would happen here, though."

"Why," Tommy says, "did they name it the Tournament of the *Flowers*?"

"The prize is a bouquet of rare flowers said to be among the most beautiful in Novixl," the man jumps in before Techno can.

What.

*What.*

“And *why*,” Tommy enunciates, “does a tournament about stabbing people have the ultimate prize as a *bouquet of flowers*.”

At this, Techno and the man share an odd sort of glance.

“It’s said if a man gifts the bouquet to his wife, they will have many healthy children,” the man finally says, looking somewhat embarrassed. “It - it supposedly has a pretty high success rate.”

“And I know for a fact-” Techno rolls his eyes, “-most winners end up selling it for a ridiculous profit. Usually to rich people with nothing better to do than scour the world for ridiculous things to add to their collections-”

“You and Phil would know something about that, wouldn’t you?” Tommy snorts.

“- and who have living styles conducive to having and raising many children,” Techno finishes, giving Tommy a half-hearted glare. “Correlation does not equal causation.”

He gives the man a sharp look, and he actually seems to shrink a bit, clipboard and all. His companion clears his throat.

“Oh, right.” Techno frowns, and then turns to Tommy and Ranboo. “What do you two think?”

“You’re not participating?” Tommy asks, surprised. Techno rarely passes up an opportunity to win something - not even to further his reputation of fear, but just for the thrill of it. The fight, the movement, the clash of metal and taste of blood. The rising elation of standing on the winner’s podium.

But Techno merely shakes his head. “No, I don’t want - I think I shouldn’t. What I’m asking is if you or Ranboo want to stay to watch - or participate.”

“Yes,” Ranboo says, while Tommy’s still brooding in consideration. “I - to participate, I mean. I kind of miss competition.”

Techno nods, some understanding Tommy doesn’t have. Must be a Hypixel thing.

“If Ranboo’s fighting, he’s not leaving me behind,” Tommy announces, making up his mind. Might as well stretch his muscles a bit more than usual, especially after a week at sea.

Techno nods, and turns back to the men. “We’ll be staying until the end of the tournament. The ship’s name is *The Camarvan*, and it’s under the command of... Theseus.”

*Theseus*. Seriously?

Tommy’s starting to think that’s Techno’s go-to name for just about everything.

And the men had to know it’s a lie, with how hesitantly Techno says it, but it must happen often enough that they simply go along with it and nod. Techno is handed a sheet of paper - a pass of some sort, Tommy glimpses, but it’s folded and tucked into a pocket soon after.

Then Techno takes one of the ropes tied to *The Camarvan*'s bow, throws it around a metal post of the pier, and begins to knot it securely.

Tommy, meanwhile, beckons to Ranboo, grinning. He bunches his leg muscles, and leaps from the ship's deck with teeth gritted.

He lands on the dock with a cheer, and Ranboo soon joins him.

Techno gives them an unimpressed look as *The Camarvan* protests the springboard movements with a few violent wobbles.

He manages to stay standing despite it though, and his expression holds more of that now familiar fondness than any actual anger, so Tommy just flashes him another grin.

And soon, Techno joins them on land as well.

~\*~

"Clementine, slow down," Wilbur pants. "I can't walk that fast."

Clementine gives him a few insistent barks, but she slows her pace until she's trotting happily beside Wilbur. The forest presses around them, alive and waving spots of shadow like a windswept rainfall.

"What do you want me to see so much anyway?" he asks. "It's all forest around here."

If he trips and hurts himself, he hopes Clementine has at least the sense to run to Phil for help. This little venture into the dense of trees behind their house had been rather unplanned, after all.

There's clearly a path Clementine is following, however, and every so often she digs her nose almost completely into the ground with a few soft sniffs, usually ending in a loud sneeze.

Wilbur also hopes she knows the way back home. This forest is just large enough to potentially get lost in, though hopefully his sense of direction won't fail him on that front. He's not sure he can quite rely on Clementine, who is rather ditzzy with following instructions on even the best of days.

"Clementine, are you sure we should really be-"

The wave of soft yellow comes into view.

And Wilbur lets out his breath, awed.

~\*~

"What is it with this place and ridiculous prizes," Tommy says. "Why would anyone eat an entire fucking crack pepper just to win... a goldfish."

"Koi fish," Ranboo corrects. "Imported all the way from the Kinoko Islands. Which is across the world, so they're very expensive."

"They're imported along with the crack peppers, I might add," Techno says dryly. He rolls his eyes as another challenger - this time a young woman - reaches to pluck one of the dried red monstrosities from the wooden bowl, surrounded by more bowls filled with water and strange fish with wide, circular mouths that open and close as though they're begging for the sweet release of death.

Also on the table are glasses of water and milk.

With a deep breath, the woman shoves the entire thing in her mouth and begins chewing furiously, jaw snapping back and forth like one of the koi fish in the glass bowls, its eyes wide as it whirls desperately in every direction - only to find even more dark eyes staring at it hungrily.

Tommy can sympathize.

The challenge is to swallow entirely and not seek relief from the water or milk for 3 entire minutes. The woman makes it to 1 minute and 40 seconds, as timed by the officiator's watch, before lunging for one of the milk glasses like a mantis. She completely downs it in less than 10 seconds.

It's long than anyone else has lasted, however, so the crowd breaks into clapping and Tommy half-heartedly joins in.

"The mistake is that most people are chewing it," Ranboo leans over to whisper to Tommy. "It burns your throat more if you just swallow it whole, and you might choke on it - but I've seen this challenge on Hypixel before and the people who swallow the peppers usually last longer than the people who don't."

"Did you try it?" Tommy whispers back, raising an eyebrow. "If you did, you spat it out immediately, didn't you?"

Ranboo at least has the decency to look ashamed.

"Out of the way," Techno's voice resounds beside them. Tommy turns to see his brother slip through two people to stand in front of the table, eyeing the bowl of peppers with a disdainful expression that is most definitely a product of emulating Wilbur's acting.

There's another wave of anticipation. Tommy strains his ears, but doesn't catch anyone whispering about him being a piglin hybrid - Nether hybrids are rare compared to most others, but not rare enough to draw too much attention by being one, especially in a well-trafficked city like Risenulf. With his mask off, Techno looks like any other other piglin hybrid.

They're still rare enough that certain characteristics remain firmly outside the pool of common knowledge, however.

"Wait - is he gonna try it too?" Ranboo whispers frantically to Tommy. "Seriously?"

Tommy gives him a sly grin in response. Oh, this would be good.

Techno flickers the man a small gray coin, cast of tin - the price for the challenge, worth more than a crack pepper, but far less than a koi fish. They'd gone to Risenulf's central bank earlier and exchanged some emeralds and gold for this city's currency.

Casually, Techno picks up a crack pepper. He turns it up and down with a look like he's judging all the imperfections it's ever had since it was a seedling - then, he plops the entire thing in his mouth.

Instead of frantic chewing, or a quick, choked swallow, as most people would anticipate, Techno grinds his jaw at a leisurely pace in a few long, maddeningly drawn out movements before swallowing like one might an apple slice.

"He - he's really good at keeping composure," Ranboo whispers.

“Eh - not really,” Tommy responds. Techno’s actually pretty bad at keeping composure. “He doesn’t need to though.”

People watch with bated breath as Techno glances around them, expression mildly bored, before then turning to the operator of this entire challenge.

“How much longer?” he asks.

“2 - 2 minutes and 37 seconds,” the game operator says, looking extremely impressed.

“And is there a limit to how many times someone can play?” Techno asks.

“No?”

Techno nods, and turns back to the bowl on the table.

Then, he plucks another crack pepper, tosses it into his mouth, and proceeds to eat it as well.

A shocked silence briefly falls over the crowd as Techno begins going through, one by one, the entire bowl of crack peppers, before it swells into an enormous symphony of amazed chatter.

“What - how?” Ranboo splutters. Tommy giggles, and then leans in close to his ear. He’d rather no one else hear this.

“Piglins have taste buds that work differently, or something like that,” he explains. “Basically, they have a lot of trouble tasting spicy shit, so this probably just feels like a light tingle to Techno.”

Techno meanwhile, is almost done with the entire bowl. He takes a moment to stop and turn back to the game operator.

“These crack peppers haven’t been dried enough,” he informs them. “There’s still salt water in them. Also, the Mizu region grows spicier ones than these. Some idiot got scammed into buying lower quality Halo crack peppers instead.”

From the look on the game operator’s face, that idiot was him.

Tommy bursts into laughter, as does Ranboo and half the crowd, the other half still stunned in shock.

By the time the 3 minutes are up, Techno is licking powdery red residue from his fingers, and the bowl sits completely empty.

“I do believe,” he says, and finally there’s a note of amusement in his voice, “that all these koi fish are mine.”

“Ye - yes,” the officiator stammers. “But-”

Techno smiles and hands him a folded bill brushed light blue, stamped with various symbols. “This should be enough to cover all the peppers.”

It’s accepted with a quick swipe, though Tommy knows it’s nowhere near enough to cover the cost of all the koi fish. The man had probably intended to use them as the prizes of near-unwinnable games for the next few weeks as the city bustled with people apparently here for the tournament.



Techno studies the bowls of fish on the table for a moment - there's a dozen of them, as far as Tommy can count. Finally, he plunges a hand through the water and grabs a wriggling white and red-splotted shape.

Swiftly, he transfers all the fish to a single glass bowl, now looking extremely crowded. Then he picks that bowl up, tucks it securely beneath his shoulder, and makes his way back towards Tommy and Ranboo,

To Tommy's annoyance, while the crowd has dispersed a bit, there's still people milling around for more entertainment. Techno roughly shoulders a few to get to them, after which he makes a motion with his shoulder that tells them they're leaving.

It's a good minute of walking before the last of the spectators disappears from sight.

"What are you doing with them?" Ranboo asks, peering at the fish all squished together in the bowl. Techno pauses as they pass what looks to be a cookout - a large fire flares beneath a metal grill, the entire thing propped up on a tripod-looking mess of poles and wires. Several people are hovering around it, holding out sticks speared with bits of meat or fruit. Nearby are market stalls - selling said raw meats and fruits.

"Community cookplaces," Techno says. "You two wanna try grilled koi fish?"

~\*~

The people they're grilling the fish with look rather alarmed by the extremely expensive and still wriggling shapes Techno stabs on his skewer. A quick glare shuts them up.

Tommy kind of wishes they could bring some back to the fish pond home. But there's no way they would survive the journey, so they might as well make the best of it.

Koi fish are rather crunchy, actually. The meat is bland, but the bones crack so easily between his teeth after the amount of fire Techno's subjected them to - easily enough that Tommy can eat the whole thing like a small, pre-dinner snack.

Ranboo, meanwhile, has discovered a newfound taste for tiny fried fish. At least there will be plenty of them available, whether he's in Sanctuary or New L'Manberg.

~\*~

It has to be warmer in a city more south, Phil thinks. Especially one with such a high density of people. Maybe he should have had them pack more lighter clothing beforehand.

Maybe he should stop sewing more gloves, too. Though he can't quite help it. So many little parts, delicate stitches, potential patterns. He won't deny they're a way to keep his hands busy.

It's about time to ask Wilbur again if he wants something specific. Phil will do that when he comes back from his little walk with Clementine.

He had wanted to go with them on that walk. So badly. *Just in case.*

He can't hover around Wilbur forever, though, and Wilbur's been managing well enough on his own lately.

All his sons have been managing well lately. Phil wonders at what point the task of parenthood no longer falls on a parent's shoulders. When would he - or his children - consider them all grown up?

A dilemma for sure. But he's not leaving them anytime too soon, so they'll sort it out eventually. Hopefully.

Phil peers close at the glove in his hands. The thumb's position is a little off. Just a little.

With a slight hum, he undoes the stitches connecting it to the rest of the glove, readjusts it with a few pins, and begins resewing the connection once more.

~\*~

Afterwards all the koi fish are eaten, they roam the city further. The main attractions are the various "carnival games", some of which Tommy and Ranboo lose, and some of which they win.

Techno wins all the games he plays, though Tommy knows he only chooses the skill based ones. By the time the sun is about an hour from setting, all three of them have full stomachs, because apparently food is a popular prize for winning games. It's certainly an appealing reason to pay the fees to play them.

Ranboo is in the middle of what he swears will be the last game they play today, trying to catch one of the mice scurrying in the pen he's in, when Tommy feels it.

Something brushes against his shoulder for just a moment, light enough to be a stray breeze, even though densest areas of the city have no such breezes with how many people crowd them - and then his satchel slips off his arm like koi fish down a waterfall.

Tommy yells as the strap disappears, almost shrieking.

He's stolen from people before, pickpocketing money or relieving them of stray rings or bracelets - but it still makes being on the receiving end of it no less infuriating. *Especially* since the satchel has his cloak in it.

Techno is hounding after the thief just a moment later.

A burning numbness settles over Tommy as he watches them disappear into the crowd, one after the other, like ripples swallowed by the ocean.

"Tommy?" Ranboo is beside him. "Tommy? It's alright. There's no way Techno can't hunt him down."

Tommy doesn't reply. It feels like the sun is caught in his throat, burning to the point of nothingness.

But he makes his way to a nearby bench, next to bushes of azalea and bright yellow tulips, and sits down. Ranboo follows, still propping words of reassurance.

*It's fine*, Tommy manages to tell himself, hands curled tight around the edges of the bench seat, all wood and sanded and almost slippery, like it was recently relacquered. *Techno will get the cloak back.*

And if he doesn't - well. There's not much to do about it, except hope Phil will create a new one. He probably will, if Tommy asks, even if he might be disappointed or angry with Tommy.

No, wait. They're not supposed to be disappointed or angry with each other, unless it's something that is definitely their fault and results in something really terrible. This isn't Tommy's fault. Too much.

Is it?

"Tommy?" Ranboo whispers, again.

"I'm fine," Tommy mutters, finally able to close his throat around words. "Thanks for - thanks for stickin' by."

"Oh - oh. No problem," Ranboo says. He's fidgeting. "You know it wasn't-"

"Wasn't my fault, yeah," Tommy says.

*Not winning the duel with Dream isn't your fault.*

*Not seeing Eret's betrayal sooner isn't your fault.*

*Not stopping Wilbur from blowing up L'Manberg isn't your fault.*

He's had those words told to him since the original L'Manberg Revolution. From Wilbur, from Tubbo, even from complete strangers he met on L'Manberg's streets.

*You know, you're only a child.*

*Your brother should have known better than to drag you along.*

*You didn't cause those problems.*

*You tried, you know? We can only expect so much of a child.*

Even the rest of his family.

*You were too young to say no to war.*

*You shouldn't have had to experience all that so young.*

*I wish I could have raised you for just a few more years.*

But Tommy's not a child anymore. He's an adult. He's 18.

Does that mean he has to take more responsibility now? What different sort of standard applies to him? He sees the way Wilbur holds himself responsible for so much - failing to stop this, failing to fix that. Every problem of L'Manberg was his to settle, and every danger to Tommy is his sworn oath to fight against.

Is that - is that what Tommy should do now? Once, before they had left the safety of Phil's protection, he wanted to be just like his brothers. During Potopia, he had despised his past self for the fanciful view.

Now, he's not sure. Where would the responsibilities lie?

"Tommy, I think you're overthinking something again," Ranboo says.

“You don’t think enough, for how much you stutter and repeat,” Tommy huffs. But he manages to focus on Ranboo’s arm around him, warm and slightly scaled in spots like patches of snakeskin, and takes a deep breath.

Techno will be back, with or without the satchel. Either way, if Tommy has questions (and he does - many, many questions), he will answer. So will Wilbur and Phil, once they get back to Sanctuary.

It’s only a matter of asking them.

Tommy wonders when that will happen. He doesn’t like tests of his courage. He’s had enough of those for a lifetime.

But decisions are happening- always happening. He knows from experience that sooner or later, this one will slap itself in his face again, adult or not. It’s only a matter of time.

## Chapter End Notes

i reply to comments live! [twitch](#)

[tumblr](#) and [twitter](#) for questions and art!

# twist the bud from the flower which cupped it

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Risenulf's streets are too crowded for even a large city of its size. Pickpockets must be having a field day with the influx of unwary travelers here for the tournament.

Techno, however, is not an unwary traveler. He keeps his steps paced, fast, eyes locked on the satchel flying wildly behind the thief.

But the thief knows these streets better than Techno does. There is every chance he might duck out of sight just long enough to hide effectively. Techno has many skills, but magically seeing people through walls is not one of them.

It means he needs an advantage. He uses a second to take in the architecture of their surrounding buildings - usually 2 or 3 stories, brick walls and roofs, window ledges spilling with vines and flowers. The geometric styles are somewhat similar to Sanctuary's, though the building materials and colors vary significantly.

It's good enough, however. The shapes are what matter.

He digs a foot into a high wall, and begins to climb.

A few well placed leaps and heaves later, he's racing across Risenulf's roofs.

It's been a while since he's done rooftop parkour. It's significantly easier than the treetops, that's for sure.

With high view, the thief - a young man, or teen child - doesn't see when Techno lands on the roof just behind him. He only reacts when Techno slinks onto his level and quickly cracks his arm around his neck, the other ripping the satchel away.

"You," Techno intones lowly, "chose the wrong person to rob."

The thief, now faintly shaking in the near death-grip, whispers something incomprehensible.

"Speak up."

The thief gasps out something again - now Techno recognizes it as a different language. It's reminiscent of those spoken in Novixl's interior lands, but not commonly recognized along the more coastal cities.

Techno knows quite a few languages - they all do, Phil having made sure of it. Primery, most commonly spoken along the northwestern Pyserne continent, is what New L'Manberg uses. Dream prefers Channelish, the language of SMP nobles and those who reside in the regions around the SMP's capital city.

Sanctuary has its own strange blend comprised of Twitieric, a language understood by many in east Novixl and which is Techno's native tongue, and whatever language the original refugee settlers of the area had spoken at the time. Wilbur and Tommy have both picked up a few more creative swears from them.

All the residents speak fluent Twitieric, so language barriers have never been much of a problem. They just switch between whatever is most convenient or comes to mind first.

Whatever this thief is speaking, however, it is not any language Techno understands, except for a few prefix sounds that he thinks might mean “move”.

There’s no point with harsh words, then. With a sigh, he tugs Tommy’s satchel firmly beneath his arm, and turns to leave just as quickly. He’s in no mood to be dealing with random street thieves today, and if he doesn’t understand Twitieric, this city’s major language, he must be a more recent immigrant.

That’s not a problem anymore, now that Techno has the satchel back. Verbal backlash or now, the thief won’t be dumb enough to come after them again.

~\*~

The game stall they had been at is mostly empty of people, those who had retired to their lodgings with the sun not far from setting. Techno has a brief moment of panic when he doesn’t see Tommy or Ranboo around, but a few seconds of searching reveals them both on a bench nearby, Tommy with his face slightly red.

*From crying?* Techno wonders. *Or is he just really upset?*

He has to be... *very* upset. The satchel holds most of the lighter belongings he has packed for this trip, including his elytra-cloak.

“Tommy,” Techno says, approaching him. “Got your satchel back.”

Gingerly, he holds it out by the strap, and just as slowly it is accepted. Ranboo glances between both of them, blinking.

Is Techno imagining the expression of relief on Tommy’s face?

“I - thanks,” Tommy says. He stands, slightly wobbling.

Should Techno be helping stabilize him? Would Tommy find the attempted help annoying?

It doesn’t matter, because after another moment or two he rights himself and pulls Ranboo up as well.

“Thanks, Techno,” Tommy repeats.

“Uh - it’s no problem,” Techno says, remembering to respond. That’s what he’s supposed to say, right?

He’s never hesitated with chasing down Tommy’s problems and threatening or stabbing them until they’re not a problem anymore. But somehow, this feels... different.

“You didn’t have to do that,” Tommy says.

Techno blinks. “Was I supposed to just let him run off with your stuff?”

“No, I mean-” Tommy stops to bit his lip. “I could have been the one chasing him down. It didn’t have to be you.”

This is getting into strange territory.

“Tommy, I know you’ve grown quite significantly, but I’m fairly sure I would still beat you in a race,” Techno says, raising an eyebrow. “I mean - if you want the practice next time, be my guest.”

Maybe Tommy does want the practice. So he can chase down thieves as fast as Techno does. It’s... reasonable. Techno supposes.

Ranboo is continuing to glance between them, expression now confused.

“I - maybe,” Tommy says. He sounds unsure, but that’s no help in informing Techno what he should respond with.

He’s... is Tommy saying he’s no longer Techno’s responsibility? Or that he never was? Tommy *is* an adult now.

Which is strange to think about. For as long as Techno has been around Tommy, the younger has been his responsibility to some degree.

Is Tommy trying to break free of that now? To take ownership of his own safety? What about Wilbur or Phil, who also held that responsibility to him?

Techno isn’t the person to be considering these questions, especially when Wilbur and Phil aren’t here to help. And he really can’t rely on himself to make good guesses on what Tommy means.

This is the first time he’s been properly responsible for Tommy alone, Techno realizes, without the rest of his family here to help as well. Or at least, he had assumed as much, but if Tommy wants to be on equal ground, to be treated like the adult he quite frankly *is*, then... Techno should let him.

Shouldn’t he? Or is this the sort of thing he should wait longer for? Discuss more first?

Not to mention Ranboo is an adult now too, older than Tommy. Hbomb had placed Techno as his temporary guardian, but Ranboo should be allowed to make his own decisions. If he wants to smuggle himself away and never return to New L’Manberg, Techno knows he would be a hypocrite to try and stop him. No one is *obligated* to go along with their forced political marriage, and then deal with all the burden that’s placed on them because of it.

Quite frankly, it’s what Techno would have done in his place a long time ago. What Tommy would have probably done as well.

Great. Now he has too many questions and no answers, again.

“I - well, look at the time!” Tommy suddenly bursts. “I think we should go and find ourselves some rooms! In a very awesome hotel, and not one of those very bad, not good ones!”

“R-right,” Techno says. He forces his thoughts onto the map of Risenulf he’s memorized. “The richest districts are in the east side. Let’s get moving.”

~\*~

Risenulf’s activity is a flame even the night can not extinguish. Like most other large settlements, it has a beacon whose dark blue beam pierces the sky and provides a shield against the monsters, which, unable to break the barrier, languish against the city walls until they burst to flame in the morning.

The beacon is located in a courtyard of the central bank, instead of the city hall like it usually is for other places. Techno follows the beacon’s light, since he knows one of the most highly regarded - and

expensive - hotels is located just beside it.

*Sunrise Hotel*, the sign declares in bright red lettering. The doors are large and mostly glass, with wood lines of support curving in intricate patterns. Tiny bells ring from the top when Tommy opens it.

“This city used to be called Sunrise,” Techno notes as they step into a line of people at the receptionist’s desk. He glances at Tommy and Ranboo, who to his surprise, are actually somewhat paying attention. “It was the original name, as far back as anyone can trace it.”

“Though,” he adds after another moment of thought. “I guess that has to be a translation, since the city’s original language isn’t the one most commonly spoken here now.”

“Sunrise sounds more similar to the naming patterns around here,” Ranboo says. “Sanctuary has stayed Sanctuary since its founding.”

“That’s because Sanctuary is fucking tiny and only idiots want to live there,” Tommy snorts. He twists the strap of his satchel around his hands. “Risenulf has like - a fuckton of foreigners.”

“They’re technically all foreigners,” Techno shrugs. “The people who founded Sunrise were refugees from the same place Sanctuary’s original settlers came from.”

“Guys, we’re holding up the line,” Ranboo interrupts.

Techno realizes it’s their turn to book rooms. Clearing his throat, he pulls his wallet from his bag - thank the gods this place has the sense to use paper money - and pulls out a few bills worth enough to buy them 2 hundred koi fish from Kinoko if they wanted to.

“Large room, 3 beds, for until the tournament ends” he says. Another thought strikes him, and he adds, “one with a large window view of the city.”

He can feel Tommy’s stare from behind.

With a nod, the receptionist writes down the specifications, accepts the bills, and hands Techno a shiny silver key.

“Room 16, sir. Second floor, to the left,” he says.

“Nice,” Ranboo whispers. “16.”

“Oh my god, you really are a New L’Manberg citizen,” Tommy grumbles back.

Techno turns to give them a beckoning motion, and leads them towards the spiraling dark oak stairs.

~\*~

“Are you worried?” Phil asks. There is no cold wind to respond in the warm shelter of their home, but Wilbur sets his guitar into its case and makes his way over to curl beside Phil on the couch.

“Isn’t it reasonable to be worried?” he murmurs. Phil shifts an arm to wrap around Wilbur’s shoulders.

“In reasonable amounts,” he agrees. “But - is it bothering you? Too much?”

“Is it bothering *you*? ”



“Techno can take care of them...” Phil hesitates.

“Tommy can take care of himself too,” Wilbur says, voicing the uncertainty in Phil’s mind. “Ranboo’s not an idiot either. They’re - they’re all - adults.”

“Does that bother you?” Phil asks. The idea still feels so unsettled, out of place in the order of things he sees. But it’s not because Tommy’s an adult - or that any of his sons are, really. He has felt this same clench when Techno first left for Hypixel, and when Wilbur originally set off with Tommy in search of greatness.

“That Tommy’s an adult? Of course not,” Wilbur says. His voice is quiet, feathery soft with the warm lantern lights. “But really, he was an adult long before his 18th birthday.”

No child survives a war unscathed. But Phil knows it is not really war which forces people to grow up - war does not have that kind of pressure to it. To survive a war one has to become numb to its horrors, at least on some level, enough so that the instinct to survive breaks through. But a child can survive a war and remain a child.

A child can not survive politics, however. War may have planted the seeds, but running L’Manberg as Secretary of State and handling Wilbur’s increasingly unsteady mental health had to have been what really forced Tommy to understand the situation from an... *adult* perspective.

The concepts of child and adult have become so blurred with Phil’s age. He knows children wiser than old men, and who sometimes grow out of that wisdom and into a different kind. Tommy understands how nations rise and run and fall, and he understands how to survive through it all.

Tommy’s line between childhood and adult has been blurred for a very, very long time.

Is what he knows enough? And should Phil stay - with Tommy, or Wilbur and Techno as well - until he is well and truly sure they are ready?

Wilbur clearly hadn’t been experienced enough to understand when to give up on L’Manberg, or become resistant to the effects of war, betrayal, and constant paranoia. Would he be able to overcome it all again, one the off-chance he’s challenged once more?

“You’re worrying too,” Wilbur murmurs, head craned into Phil’s neck. “You’ll make all your hair fall out at this point, old man.”

Phil is too distracted to rebuke the jab at his age, but he tightens his hug around Wilbur and huffs a sigh.

“You think Tommy’s adult enough that I don’t - I shouldn’t be hovering over him all the time?” Phil asks.

“Well, between me and Tommy, I’m definitely the more helpless,” Wilbur says. Phil trails a wing corner down Wilbur’s cheek.

“But - so what about you, then? Should I watch over your shoulder for all eternity?”

“Well, not *eternity*, ” Wilbur laughs. “Not least of which because one of us will have a grave far sooner than the other.”

Now Phil’s chest really constricts, tighter than a string-thin knot. But he forces the thoughts away and simply presses.

“Wilbur.”

“Yes, I - I understand.” Wilbur drops his joking tone and sighs. “I’m not in a hurry to be going anywhere. I can’t do much - I’ll be perfectly happy just staying with wherever you are, and helping wherever I can, if you’ll have me-

“ *Of course* I’ll have you!”

“Then that’s settled,” Wilbur says, hands fidgeting.

“You said you were happy with yourself just a year before you and Tommy left,” Phil recalls. “I was - I was around a lot more back then.”

“You’ve already said sorry for that,” Wilbur says. “And I’ve already forgiven you.”

“Did you?” Phil realizes his wing is almost covering Wilbur’s face. He hastily shifts it away. “I don’t remember...”

“I never told you? Or one of us forgot something.” Wilbur frowns. “Ah - typical, I guess. But yeah, I forgave that a... while ago. It was after I tried to kill myself with the cliffs. I woke up in Scott’s house, we talks a bit, and then I saw you come into the room...”

His voice dropped, to barely a breadth of whisper. “We - you came for me. That’s what I thought, at the time. You came for me. I didn’t think - I didn’t want you to, and I wasn’t expecting you to. Keep searching that hard, I mean. But you did, and after that day I think I stopped resenting you for all the other times you didn’t. They all felt so insignificant compared to - to how you came for me then.”

“Oh,” Phil says quietly. Wilbur nods, curling furthering until he’s halfway on Phil’s lap and chest.

“I later realized you came for me on the 16th too,” he says. “Me, and Techno, and Tommy too. You cared to come. So you came. And you tried to help and - well, it’s worked out to here, isn’t it?”

Wilbur brushes something from his eyes. His hands are shaking. “I can trust you to come for me again, if you know I need you.”

“Those childhood absences aren’t nothing, though,” Phil murmurs. And right now, despite how his chest aches, he can do little more to comfort Wilbur than keep murmuring and embrace him further.

“No,” Wilbur agrees. “But I was already an adult by the time you started flying out further. I - I sort of understood, and I felt the need for it too. And Techno started doing it before you.”

He sighs, a tiny and sad sounding noise. “Besides, I left too, didn’t I? And I did something worse. I brought Tommy. He was - Tommy was so confused, but he trusted me. I should have waited another 5 years before I even thought of leaving.”

“You don’t have any desire to leave now, do you?” Phil asks, though he knows the futility of the question.

Wilbur shakes his head.

“War and politics have drained that all out of me,” he says. “I know Techno wants a very long break too. But Tommy is - he’s always been independent, you know? We’ve got the New L’Manberg trip in a few months. If he wants to go somewhere else soon after that, and if he wants me to join, I will.”

“He’ll want you more than me,” Phil says. The thought bothers him only in that it’s another reflection of how little reason he’s given Tommy to trust him.

“You know, Tommy doesn’t resent you as much as you think he does,” Wilbur says, twisting to frown up at him again. Phil blinks. “You did give him a home and food and like - pretty much anything money could buy. You paid him a lot of care and attention in the years right after you adopted him. You were basically all of our personal tutors. He remembers that too, just like he remembers everything else.”

“Still,” Phil murmurs, but those are questions long overdue for Tommy.

“Overall, I don’t think you’ve done, like - a *terrible* job,” Wilbur says, turning his eyes downcast again. “Let’s face it - L’Manberg was mostly my fault. Yes, I felt a little neglected because Techno was showing everyone up and you were around less than you used to be for a while, but that wasn’t an excuse to drag Tommy into my delusions.”

He reaches for one of Phil’s wings, the motion seemingly absentminded. Phil lowers it closer to his, and Wilbur grasps the curved edge softly.

“If I had just stayed around a little longer,” he says, “probably until you or Techno could at least convince me to leave Tommy with you two... we wouldn’t be in this situation right now.”

“That’s all said and done,” Phil says. “I should have known better than to think I had much understanding of this parenting thing. I - after you and Tommy left, I talked to a lot of people about it.”

“You couldn’t have known.” Wilbur runs a hand along Phil’s wing. It tickles, the slightest bit. “It’s not - I guess it’s not exactly similar to how you grew up. Besides, your old man brain must have forgotten anything useful the minute after you learned it.”

He chuckles, though it’s more to lighten the mood than anything else. Phil smiles faintly to him.

Wilbur eventually quiets, and then shifts to be more comfortable. “I don’t know if the me 10 years from now will be content just living like this, or if my ambition will take hold of me again, but I - I want to be with you. Or Tommy, or Techno, and preferably all of us together. I hope that doesn’t change.”

He pauses. “And I have to take responsibility for my future too, not my past.”

“I’ll be there,” Phil says. He’ll be there. He has to. “Even if - I know adults are supposed to take responsibility of their own lives. And you can.”

It feels better that way, he knows.

“I know,” Wilbur murmurs. “We’ll - sort it out as we go. I know you want to help.”

“Yeah.”

*Want to help* is an understatement. But Wilbur should be making his own choices about what he accepts.

“You can. Help. I know I can’t really do a lot of things now, or I do them even worse than before,” Wilbur says, so matter-of-factly Phil’s wings shudder against him and want to never let Wilbur go.

“But I’ll do what I can,” Wilbur continues. “And we can always talk it out. We want to stay together, right?”

“Right,” Phil says. He tilts his head to catch a glimpse of the night sky, windowed from across the room.

The stars are bright tonight. No clouds, a moon almost blank. Somewhere in the deep, dark valleys, wolves are howling a chorus.

Wilbur is warm in his wings, suppressing a yawn. There is no cold wind to respond to him.

“Right,” Phil whispers again. “We want to stay together.”

He hopes Tommy and Techno thinks so too, at least for now. Despite everything, there’s still so much more for them.

## Chapter End Notes

oh look its dadza and wilby

also, i really just... can not restrain myself with the worldbuilding huh. if you guys thought that was an unnecessary info dump you really dont want to see all the stuff i made myself cut out

## legacies are continuations chaptered

Tommy wakes first this morning, not to birdsong or crashing waves like his sleep-dazed brain expects, but instead to shouts and steady conversation muffled by marble walls.

It takes a minute to remember where he is - in a city busier than usual, surrounded by people from all over.

The hotel room has color tones of light blues and whites, the walls painted and floors rugged with llama furs. Tommy flings the blankets off himself and rubs his eyes clear in a beam of sunlight. Techno and Ranboo are still asleep in their beds.

Well. Since he's the first up, might as well be the first to get breakfast.

Just before he reaches the door, he remembers he should probably leave a note.

A piece of paper is located, as well as quill and ink on his bedstand.

*Going down to find food so I don't starve - Tommy*

He leaves it tucked in one of Ranboo's long, twitching ears. That'll give him a fun surprise.

~\*~

"Are you reading *Raven Songs*?" Tommy asks, stopping.

Normally, he would be all for minding his own business, but the man's finger had just stopped at the end of the story, black words spread like a feathery splotch on the page before him.

"You recognize it?" the man asks. "It's one of Whitelisted's - or supposedly Whitelisted's - more obscure works, not just because it wasn't even published by him."

Tommy, very faintly, remembers the story. He had found it poking through Techno's stash of books one day, its position marked clear by a raven feather bookmark.

One look had told him Techno was indeed the author. A tale of a raven betrayed and driven mad by it, who returned to scorch the earth with his vengeful song. Written during Pogtopia.

Techno had never intended for it to be published, or read by anyone other than him, though Tommy supposes something like it would have sold for a lot of money to help rebuild New L'Manberg. He knows fully well why Tubbo had done it.

"I read it a while ago," Tommy muses.

"It's nearly 2 years old, and it's the last thing Whitelisted wrote that anyone knows of." The man frowns. "If President Underscore's claim is even to be believed."

"President Tubbo," Tommy corrects.

"What?"

“New L’Manberg’s current government is known as the Tubbo Administration, not the Underscore Administration,” Tommy says. “It’s what all the official documentation says. So it’s New L’Manberg President Tubbo, not Underscore.”

“...weird, but okay.” the man shrugs. “I guess Underscore is too foreign sounding for New L’Manberg’s people, huh?”

“Yeah,” Tommy sighs, because that *is* why Tubbo had insisted on the first name use. That, and it made him seem more approachable.

“Anyway, don’t go spreading this, but I do think there’s a good chance Whitelisted is dead,” the man says, expression suddenly serious. “Few established authors completely drop off the grid with no new writings just like that, and his or her last proper publication was years ago.”

“Their books do describe a lot of rather dangerous events they’ve personally witnessed, so maybe their luck got pushed a bit too far,” Tommy says, nodding, like he’s not fueling a conspiracy theory about Techno’s death. It’s not like this is the first one they’ve heard, and it certainly won’t be the last.

It’ll just be all the funnier when Techno’s potato book comes out. Even if his adoring fans will probably be rather confused as to why it’s about *potatoes* of all things, instead of the nations and empires he’s previously written about.

The man nods, sagely. Tommy tries not to laugh, and quickly excuses himself from the table to find somewhere more quiet in the hotel lobby to eat.

~\*~

“Are you two sure you want to sign up for this?” Techno asks, once again.

Tommy rolls his eyes, gives the amused looking tournament officiant the golden bank note that includes their fees, and says, “there. Now it’s done.”

“Ran,” Ranboo says to the man, who jolts it down with a nod. “That’s my name. The smug one is Tommy.”

“Who are you fucking calling smug?”

“Let’s get moving,” Techno sighs. “We’re holding up the line. Again.”

After Tommy and Ranboo are done signing up for the Tournament of the Flowers, or whatever ridiculous name it’s known as, Techno drags them both to Risenulf’s central post office of all places.

“To let Phil and Wilbur know we’ll be gone a few days longer than expected,” he explains.

There’s a line. A very, very long line. It takes nearly an hour of waiting until they’re at the front desk, where Techno writes the message, pays the fee, notes the location, and then beckons for them to leave.

Tommy thinks his next letter to Tubbo should include a request to decree that New L’manberg’s post offices be designed to not enforce claustrophobia on whoever needs to conduct business in them.

~\*~

“A pigeon for us?” Wilbur blinks.

“Two of them, waiting in the town center,” Hbomb says. “Scott’s holding onto them for you two.”

Strange, but alright. It has to be from Techno, Tommy, and Ranboo.

When they arrive, Scott is scowling grumpily at the two pigeons, both flapping their wings indignantly as he holds them by the legs.

“Finally!” he says when he sees them. “They’re your problem now. Wouldn’t let me take their stupid messages”

Wilbur reaches out an arm, and one of the pigeons immediately hops onto it. His fingers comb gently through slightly worn feathers.

He feels the outline of a thin collar around its neck. Tracing it reveals a nameplate - *Troid*, it says.

“Hello, Troid,” Wilbur whispers. “What do you have for me?”

Troid raises its head, revealing a tiny corked vial attached to his collar as well. In it is a square of paper, with *Wilbur & Phil, Sanctuary* inked in barely visible letters.

Wilbur gingerly unties the vial. Troid abruptly launches itself into the air, back to wherever post it’s stationed at.

He uncorks the vial, slides out its content, and scans the paper.

“Just Techno letting us know Risenulf is hosting the Tournament of the Flowers this year, and Tommy and Ranboo have signed up, so they’ll be a bit late getting home,” he tells Phil.

Phil’s pigeon, also relieved of its message, takes off as well.

“By, Dara!” Phil calls to the pigeon. He turns to Wilbur. “This one says the same thing.”

“Alright then,” Wilbur says. Messages sent via pigeon get lost in transit often enough that people who can afford it pay to have 2, or even 3 or 4 pigeons sent carrying the same message, just in case. He wouldn’t be surprised if more pigeons showed up for them soon - Techno’s always been overprepared like that.

“Anyway, guess we have another week or two to ourselves,” Phil says. He turns to Scott. “Did Pearl say anything about joining our newest campaign?”

Wilbur suddenly realizes he hasn’t seen Pearl around in a while. Strange, since she’s usually at the library, the harbor, or roaming Sanctuary’s streets - all places Wilbur haunts frequently as well.

“Oh - about that. Pearl’s - she left Sanctuary a week ago,” Scott says, looking away. “Apparently she got the same invitation Gem did, but decided to wait a while longer before leaving. I think she wanted to finish organizing the library’s old documents first.”

“Pearl left?” Wilbur blinks. That’s... rather unexpected news.

“Said something about better opportunities,” Scott shrugs. “It was kind of last minute news she sprung on us - like, day before she left. Me, Hbomb, and Lizzie now split her work.”

“Maybe Lizzie would like to join our newest campaign,” Wilbur muses.

Scott groans at the idea, and Phil chuckles in response. Clearly, they've had more experience with her than Wilbur.

Either way, they'll pass the time. Like they always do.

~\*~

The first day of the tournament comes quickly. The instructions are to wear simple clothing, as armor and weapons are provided, so Tommy and Ranboo both don thin pants and short-sleeved shirts.

They're directed to the participant's gallery, close to the arena, where they'll watch the rounds with the others until their names are called up.

Supposedly, the order and participants of each round are decided randomly. Techno highly doubts it.

When they reach the gallery, and Techno bids Tommy and Ranboo both good luck. Then, he turns to make his way to the First Tier stands.

The First Tier tickets allow access to a series of sectioned front row seats that include a large chair, table, and free drinks and snacks. Techno had outbid several other disappointed people for one of them, and as he makes his way there, he sees most of the seats are already been filled by the other people rich and lucky enough to snag a ticket.

One of the tables at the far end of the First Tier gallery is empty. Quickly, Techno makes his way over and claims the seat before anyone else tries to object.

The chair's armrest is large enough for him, which is a surprise. The table has two menus detailing which drinks and snacks he can flag down a waiter to bring him like he's at some restaurant.

The tables are intended for pairs, however. Techno eyes the empty seat on the other side - if the tickets have sold out, like they must have, someone else will occupy that seat.

Unless they no-show. Techno hopes they do.

According to the schedule, there's still around 15 minutes until the first round begins. Unfortunate, that the gates don't close for late people.

Around 5 minutes later, however, a young woman plops herself onto the empty seat. Techno, very politely, tries to hide his disappointment.

"Listen, I know you don't like this," the woman says, which means he definitely failed, "but it was either sit with you, some random creep who was looking at me funny, or a ship captain who had *just* gotten off a voyage and smells like dead fish."

"Hello," Techno says flatly. There's a short pause.

"Hello," the woman says back. "I'm Jocelyn. Do you feel like giving me your name?"

Techno goes with the one he's been using since November 16th, for himself and others.

"Call me Theseus," he says.

"Like from Grecian mythology?"



“Yes.”

“Cool.” Jocelyn pulls up a satchel that’s even larger than Techno’s onto her lap and begins pulling out sheets of paper, parchment, and various books to place on the table. Each addition slides the entire wave a bit closer to Techno.

She pauses when Techno gingerly pushes aside a paper that had reached far enough to poke his elbow. “I hope you don’t need too much of this space, because I do.”

“No, you’re fine,” Techno says awkwardly.

“Great.”

The papers, as far as he can tell, are filled to the brim with written notes, rough sketches, and... very complicated math. Even he’s not sure how some of it works, and he’s the one who thought academic study was a fun challenge to pursue to its limits among his family.

Jocelyn flips to a blank page in one of the many notebooks she now has out. From her satchel she also pulls out an inkpot, whose lid she jerks off, and a long wooden case that opens to reveal a dozen quills inside.

With a quick dip, she begins writing.

The sound of her quill scratching is almost drowned out by the noise of conversation from the rows upon rows of spectators above them, further up in the arena’s viewing stands. There must be at least 10 thousand people, probably a good few thousand more.

The Tournament of the Flowers is a decently well known one. And Risenulf is a city that knows how to market.

The quill in Jocelyn’s hands continues, however, with its *scritch scritch scritch*, heedless of the excited chatters and yells around them.

The First Tier gallery is situated decently far from the main viewing areas, with a barrier around them, so the noise isn’t as bad as it can be. Still, Techno would have found it hard to write anything useful. Jocelyn is attacking whatever writing she has with a quick, almost frantic ferocity that reminds him of a devoted student taking a test.

He stays quiet, and turns to observe the arena. The ground is sandy, but scattered with rocks from the size of his fist to boulders large as adult moose. One is even shaped vaguely like a charging beast. In certain areas, it looks as though gravel had rained from the sky, dumped from sandbags.

The landscape has some variation, though not too much, and a clever fighter would search for opportunities to take advantage. Techno wonders if any of the arena’s maintainers have considered growing a tree in the middle of it.

High above the arena also hangs a board. It’s massive and shows a giant blank bracket for now, but extending off of it is a platform on which two men stand, with what looks to be large paint brushes in their hands.

So they can record the match-ups and see who wins. Techno notes, however, that most people from the further end of the viewer stands - especially those with poorer eyesight - will likely not be able to read the names.

It'll spread with word of mouth among the spectators, like it usually does.

After a while, a loud horn pierces through the conversation.

The entire stadium quiets to a hush. The constant *scratch* stops - from the corner of his eye Techno sees Jocelyn put down her quill, stretch her arms, and turn to the bracket board as well.

Above the board is another podium, smaller. Now a man is standing atop it as well, voice amplifier held to his mouth.

"Hello, and welcome to the 50th Tournament of the Flowers! I hope you are all enjoying your stay in Risenulf. Pretty place, isn't it?"

The voice echoes and bounces around the stadium, louder than what most would expect. That's proper architectural design right there.

"Well, today marks the beginning of the tournament! As usual, the winner receives the Bouquet of Good Fortune, which I presume many of our young men over there in the participant's gallery would like to bring home to their wives?"

Waves of cheerful laughter follow the statement, no doubt because everyone knows the winner will most likely sell the bouquet instead of gifting it to any partner. Techno glances to see Jocelyn frantically scribbling in her notebook again. A squint reveals she's merely transcribing the announcer's words, as well as the crowd reaction.

"Well, they'll have to fight long and hard for it. And this time, we've organized something very special in the bouquet - it will include two of the premium, exotic prism tulips! Sympathize for me, people, because the organizers nearly wrung my head off when I suggested it. But what better way to celebrate the 50th anniversary than with flowers that took 50 years of effort to breed?"

Techno nearly snorts. Prism tulips took 34 years of concentrated effort to breed, not 50 like popular belief suggests.

"Now, enough dawdling - I'm sure you're all very eager to see blood, but normal rules apply! Two opponents fight each other until one is disarmed, pinned down, or announces they give up. And without further ado, let's introduce our first pair of contestants - 5up and Wallibear!"

~\*~

Tommy doesn't recognize any faces among the other contestants. A few are hidden behind cloaks, despite the summer heat.

He doesn't bother. After all, he looks like just any other young man. There's not even any distinctive features that could easily pin him as from a particular ethnic group, besides maybe his blond hair.

Ranboo, meanwhile, shifts beside him, now looking somewhat nervous. But few pay him any attention.

Tommy chooses to focus on the fight for now. The contestants have light chain armor over their shirts and pants, and swords that at first glance appear iron, but shimmer all wrong in the sunlight. It takes a moment to realize they're made of wood, coated smooth and thick with a glimmery silver paint.

The edges are dulled, Tommy confirms after 5up slams his sword into Wallibear's legs with just enough force to knock him off balance. Wallibear collapses down, but rolls sideways from 5up's boot

attempting to pin him down.

Quick as a sand viper, 5up darts to bring his sword down again, but Wallibear grabs his ankle and *twists*.

5up crashes into pale plumes with a yell, but manages to force his sword beneath Wallibear's throat as his shoulder hits the sand beside his opponent. Before Wallibear can push it off, 5up whips himself on top of him and darts out his other hand to secure the sword's edge against Wallibear's throat.

His other knees move too, one to pin itself into Wallibear's stomach, and the other to shift and steady its grip on the sandy arena.

It is for 10 very long seconds that everyone watches, breath baited, as Wallibear thrashes weakly beneath 5up's hold - but eventually he slumps, and mutters something too faint for even Tommy, who is one of the closest spectators, to hear.

5up nods and lets go of his grip, however, so it must have been an acknowledgement of defeat. Both contestants stand, brushing sand and gravel from their chainmail - and then, they shake hands. Just like that.

"Well, there we have it!" the announcer's booming voice echoes. "5up is the winner, and will proceed to the next round! We bid farewell to Wallibear, at least in the arena."

"What do you think?" Ranboo murmurs, joining the throng of people now engaging in hushed conversation among them.

"They both knew what they were doing," Tommy says. "The fight was pretty quick."

Quick fights usually meant skilled opponents, though of course luck determines far more than what most people realized about swordfights.

"That was really fast reaction time," Ranboo murmurs. "I'm not sure I can match that."

"I'm guessing they were two of the better fighters," Tommy says. They had certainly seemed so to him, compared to the numerous other displays of sword skill he's seen over the past few years. "Just try your best. Or don't - no one's expecting you to do amazing."

To some other people that would sound patronizing. But Ranboo smiles at the words, shoulders relaxing.

"And for our next round - Ran and Purpled!" the announcer says cheerfully.

Tommy bursts into laughter. Ranboo dissolves into a series of bewildered splutters beside him, tail lashing back and forth.

Of all the people to be going second, it's *Ranboo*. Just as they were talking about how he would fight! The timing is just too good.

Somehow, the name they had submitted makes it all the funnier. "Ranboo" would be edging on a little too conspicuous, but "Ran" is a common enough prefix in ender-hybrid names, so "Ran" it had been.

Tommy smothers his laughter enough to push Ranboo towards the tunnel that leads to the arena, the latter still mumbling disbelief.

It's only when his black and white tail disappears into the darkness, however, that Tommy finally processes the name of his opponent.

Ranboo versus... *Purpled*.

# the sky does not limit

## Chapter Notes

[discord](#) to get pings for updates/discuss stuff!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Purpled?” Techno leans forward, ever so slightly. Curiosity and confusion spin glass fractals in his mind, melting ribbons condensing into a frown.

It’s not exactly an established name. He knows exactly one Purpled - a former Hypixel champion as well, slightly older than Tommy, who made a home in a disputed territory L’Manberg and the Dream SMP had torn trench lines over in their battles.

“Another new name,” Jocelyn murmurs. “Though sort of familiar.”

Her notes now completely swamp the table. At this point, it’s clear she’s here for research or record-keeping related reasons, probably from some academic institution. The quill hasn’t stopped its furious whirlwind since the first match’s beginning - a rather impressive feat Techno suspects many of her peers would kill to emulate. He knows he certainly would.

Then again, he would kill for a great many reasons, and none at all as well.

His chest twists at the thought, a small feeling, like Tommy’s forlorn gaze is pierced right through him. Techno has given up understanding why.

Instead he trains his gaze onto the dark tunnel in the arena’s walls, which leads to the participant’s gallery. A few moments later the unmistakable shape of Ranboo’s tall frame, crowned by nervously flickering ears, steps into view. He’s wearing the same armor as the previous contestants, all light gray chain, and carries in one hand an edge-round blade of wood.

He makes his way to one side of the sandy canvas, almost tripping over a boulder in the process.

And then, his opponent strides into the sunlight.

Pale blond hair, almost slivery. That serpentine gait, water-like in grace. Eyes purple as a royal banner.

It’s Purpled. The same one who was a Hypixel Champion, who had earned the title and shed it just as quickly for further lands, like Techno had. The same one who was at the Battle of Manberg.

The same one who had killed slain a wither unleashed upon L’Manberg.

“Begin!” the announcer calls cheerfully.

Purpled poises, curls his shoulders inward with eyes narrowed. His movements sway back and forth like a dance - and then, before Ranboo can bring his sword up to cover his bewildered expression - Purpled strikes.

~\*~

“Holy shit,” Tommy says as Purpled slams into Ranboo like an arrow.

In half a second Ranboo is pinned to the ground and thrashing, Purpled’s hand wrenched tight around a straining, vein-popped neck. The other hand dips a sword tip into soft stomach, a knee is just beside it, not in a way dissimilar to the previous match.

Hands shoot up to push or pull, but Purpled *bites* one of them and crashes his heeled boot into the palm of another. Ranboo stifles a strangled yell of pain, the sound barely audible.

They’re twisted there, one dug deep into the other’s vaguely flailing body. Purpled and Ranboo, stalemated by the tournament’s rules, awaiting the inevitable announcement of the match’s end.

Half a minute passes, during which Ranboo’s wormy movements slow, like each kick or squirming action coats a new layer of slime over his muscles. He’s weakening, more so as he sees no escape available.

“Well, it seems rather clear!” the announcer eventually declares. “Purpled wins this match! A most impressive display.”

If there is any disappointment, he hides it well, but Tommy knows one-move fights like these don’t entertain a crowd very long.

Hopefully, he doesn’t last as pitifully short as Ranboo.

Purpled is off of him in a flash, and then two steps back. He doesn’t bother to shake hands, but offers a curt nod before disappearing into the exit tunnel, leaving Ranboo to gather his sword from the ground and stumble after him.

~\*~

When Ranboo comes back, neck bruised and clutching his hand, Tommy offers him a grin.

“Don’t feel too bad. Purpled knows what he’s doing,” he says. He fails to keep all the mirth from his voice.

“Oh, shut up,” Ranboo mutters darkly. “That was unlucky.”

“Unlucky you drew to go against who the winner of this stupid tournament will probably be.”

He’s given a surprised look in reply.

“You think Purpled will win?” Ranboo asks.

Tommy pauses to consider the question in a few ways.

“Do you know him?” he settles on replying.

Now that he thinks about it, Ranboo probably *doesn’t*. There’s no way a mercenary-for-hire like Purpled would be allowed anywhere near New L’Manberg’s fragile government.

Ranboo opens his mouth, as though to say something - but then he frowns. A hand reaches into his pocket and pulls out his memory book, which he spends a minute flipping through.

“That’s what I thought,” he eventually mutters. “Huh. That’s a surprise.”

“Thought what?” Tommy asks.

“About Purpled,” Ranboo says. “I’ve heard his name. Hypixel native, former champion who’s left for other places. But I’ve never met him, no.”

“He used to live in L’Manberg. Or that general area.”

“*Really?* How did I not-”

“No one has the time to tell you every single detail about every past event.”

Ranboo sighs, and mutters an “unfortunately” under his breath.

Tommy sweeps his vision around the participant’s gallery, but Purpled is nowhere to be seen.

“Well,” he shrugs. “Like I said, Purpled’s really good. Winning this thing - half of it’s actual skill, and the other half’s just luck and shit. If there’s one person I have to bet money on, though, it would be him.”

After all, Purpled did what Tommy couldn’t do.

He survived the wars with all his attachments intact.

~\*~

“I’ve seen the name before, I know I have,” Jocelyn continues to mutter; even as her quill darts in and out of the inkpot again, and even as Purpled incapacitates Ranboo within 2 seconds.

“Hypixel,” Techno finds himself saying.

“What?” Jocelyn looks up, eyes half-lidded, in that dazed way people do when on the verge of piecing together comprehension.

“Hypixel Champion. Native one. Left a while ago.”

“Oh. Right. Read his name in a list.”

“Like how someone will read this report of yours some day?” Techno can’t help asking.

“My professor. A few other students - mostly my classmates. We’re a small group.” Jocelyn’s pace doesn’t slow. Techno wonders if she made a deal with some dark god for unnaturally gifted note-taking abilities.

“And then it lies on a shelf collecting dust in your university library?”

She somehow manages to fit a shrug into the response. “At least it’s there. I’d rather be doing the analyzing than the actual fighting.”

There’s a pause, where Jocelyn’s hand stills into rest for the first time since she’s started. “This is more of a practice trial than anything else for me. One day I’ll be recording actual battles, and of course I’d rather not get caught up in the conflict when *that* happens.”

So she's a student training not just to learn history, but to record it as well. Everything is pieced of primary sources. Techno knows how many of those academics end up - dead, another unfortunate civilian casualty.

There's a rather small pool of people within the profession. Militaries need spies and scouts, not journalists, unless those journalists are skilled propagandists as well.

With a jolt, Techno realizes he fits the criteria to be all of them.

Hasn't he done exactly what Jocelyn is doing right now, the results published under Whitelisted, that cursed pen name? Recorded histories, made analysis, given broader context? Except, he was rarely a bystander in those - Whitelisted is an author, but Technoblade is the Blood God.

More importantly, perhaps, Technoblade is The Blade. The famed warrior.

But the age of famed warriors has already come to pass. There are no room for more one-man legends anymore - even now, most of Techno's reputation comes from tournaments and duels and Hypixel games, not actual battles. New L'Manberg will... will it be the last?

Techno's alliance to Pogtopia had provided far more in terms of gear and resources and strategies. He supplied the weapons, the armor - but more importantly, the information and the food. The benefit of his actual fighting prowess had been negligible, nothing compared to the thousands of troops on either side.

At this rate, he might as well just become a chronicler of historical events, rather than a participant. Why does he have to involve himself in the midst of so much?

He *doesn't* have to. He hadn't wanted to in a long time, and he had been content in that limbo until Wilbur called on him.

Wilbur will not call on him for such a purpose again. Neither will Phil or Tommy.

"You won't last very long recording battles like you're recording these," Techno informs Jocelyn. "The point of collateral damage is that no one powerful enough bothers to prevent it."

Jocelyn shrugs. "Soon, there won't be much stabbing at all, and it really will come down to mostly luck."

"And what does that mean?" Though, he has some clues already.

"Well," Jocelyn says. "Since you're talking like this, and have the money to sit here, I'm going to assume you're familiar with more widely known world events."

Her quill is on the table now, still, though her gaze is focused clearly on the next match in the arena - between two men Techno doesn't know and doesn't care to know.

"Haven't been keeping up as much in the past year," Techno says. "But I would say I know more than your average person, yes."

"Well, take for instance the widespread usage of dynamite in New L'Manberg's struggle for independence against the Dream Kingdom," Jocelyn begins. "The explosions caused more damage and casualties than soldiers ever did, and that was what forced New L'Manberg's hand in the end."

"L'Manberg," Techno corrects.



“What?”

“New L’Manberg began under the Tubbo Administration. Before then, the nation was called L’Manberg. That’s what the Dream SMP fought a war with.”

Jocelyn seems to consider him silently for a moment, eyes glittering black.

“Alright,” she says finally. “Though, it was the dynamite and withers unleashed on L’Manberg that caused enough destruction for them to tack a ‘New’ onto it afterwards, wasn’t it?”

This - actually discussing these academic fields with someone else, instead of being mired in his own tangled mind - feels, surprisingly, not as bizarre as Techno expects.

““Yes,” he says.

“That’s where most of the damage and casualties came from on the 16th of November too,” she says, tapping her quill’s gray end against her papers. “This is not the first usage of withers or explosives in warfare, not by a long shot, but it was one of the most damaging. Most dramatic. It attracted a lot of attention.”

“You think more nations will start using them?” Techno asks.

“I know so,” she says simply. “Military technology has been progressing steadily faster for the past 50 years. It’s only a matter of time before people start trying to create withers with 10 heads or twice as explosive projectiles. I’m saying, normal foot soldiers and cavalry are already starting to lose their previous importance.”

“It’s very new territory,” Techno agrees.

New territory that has little room for The Blade, the Blood God. He could bring down a wither or two - but how long until someone figures out how to build a farm for wither skulls, and unleashes hundreds or thousands? Enough to perhaps destroy an entire nation, and entire continent?

*Battles are no place for individuals.*

*Commanders focus less on strategy, and more on logistics.*

Great. At this point, he might as well hang up his emblems and join Phil in his isolationism.

Techno isn’t sour, or salty, or unsure, or afraid of this looming future *at all*. He still has the tournaments, the games.

*And how long until I run out of those? Either because of myself or others?*

Again. He could always join Phil.

Techno knows there’s something broken in the way he thinks, because he should not feel plunged into coldness whenever the idea of no longer living up to his title - his purpose - comes as not just a possibility, but an inevitable future.

But... he doesn’t really have a purpose, does he? No one does. Fighting isn’t even the only thing he’s good at - far from it, if his family’s insistence is to be believed.

Jocelyn is back to writing again. Techno's eyes glaze over the next few matches - some last longer than others, and some include more famous names while others do not. All of them show expected levels of skill and strategy. Nothing like Purpled's lightning display.

They're lapsed in silence until, eventually, towards what has to be nearing the last few matches of the day-

"And the next round is Tommy versus Kreek!"

The introduction is the shortest and briefest it has been yet.

A minute later Tommy stalks into the arena, sand billowing around his boots. A tall, thin willow of a man follows him.

Techno leans forward. Hopefully, this will be good.

He should flag down someone to bring him a glass of water, get his money's worth. And the roasted lobster on the menu looks good.

"Ready... and begin!"

~\*~

Tommy had been considering Purpled's strategy - strike fast and pin his opponent to the ground, sword or hand at their throat.

But Purpled is, without a doubt, more agile than him, and far more experienced with those kinds of surprise attacks. Tommy might have been able to pull it off with someone around his size or smaller, but not this swaying tree of a man he's faced with.

Instead, when Kreek advances with his sword the moment "begin!" echoes the arena, Tommy skitters back and *runs*.

The crowd isn't particularly impressed - he's decently sure he hears some boos. But Tommy's long since stopped caring about how entertaining other people think his battle strategies are.

Sand dents beneath his boots, and he has to remain careful not to trip in them. But Tommy manages his loping pace around the arena, back and forth, weaving around towering boulders with barely a shoulder scrape, staying well beyond Kreek's attempts at engagement.

"You can't keep this up forever!" the man shouts at some point.

*I know, Tommy doesn't reply. I just need to keep it up longer than you.*

After a while, it's rather obvious Kreek doesn't have the raw speed or agility needed to catch up to him. He has to rely on stay out of sight or sound long enough to cut Tommy off - but Tommy is more than familiar with keeping track of position.

At some point, the crowd dulls to mostly silence - well, as silent as a spectator crowd can be. It's all faint murmurs and quiet discussions on how the round might end.

Tommy keeps the chase up for several minutes. This is probably the longest a fight has lasted so far. But eventually, he places the next step of his shell of plan into action.

He slows his pace before a giant boulder - nearly twice as high as he is, steep and craggled - and launches himself into a climb. Kreek, he knows, doesn't have the time to catch up and stop him.

By the time Kreek arrives at the boulder's base, Tommy is crouched on top and grinning down viciously, his own sword now brandished.

Kreek takes a hesitant step back. They both know where the advantage lies now - Tommy is in the higher defending position. He'll be able to see Kreek coming from any direction.

"Can't keep this up forever, hm?" Tommy laughs. "I guess you were right!"

Something prickles against his side, not quite physical, but like goosebumps pinching his skin. Tommy turns his head ever so slightly.

He catches Techno's gaze from the front row, eyes red as first dawn.

And then, he sees the curving smile and subsequent nod of approval.

Tommy's hands tightened their grip on the sword. He suddenly feels too light for the world around him.

Techno has praised him for a lot in the past year and a half, but this is the first time it has been because of Tommy's ability to win a fight.

He had once hounded his brother for lessons, for practice, for spectatorship, for this kind of praise.

It's not the same craving need for approval anymore. He's not the boy who had worshipped his brother's blade and bundled a cloak of ignorance over the blood and tears that had been shed to hone its edge.

But it's significant nonetheless. It *means* something, nonetheless. Something he knows is more good than bad, more harmless than not, despite his inability to define it.

Snapping back to his opponent, Tommy lets his grin widen further. It's not over yet - but if he has any say in it, then it will be soon.

Kreek frowns, taking another step back. He's studying the boulder, looking for a way up or to knock Tommy down - Tommy can think of a way or two that might even work, but he's not allowing Kreek the opportunity to execute any plan.

The moment Kreek turns his body aside while eyeing a patch of nearby gravel, Tommy leaps.

Gravity pulls him faster than any reaction. Kreek screeches when Tommy lands boot-first onto his chain-covered back and they both crash down in a shower of limbs.

In the next instant, Tommy's sword is jammed against the back of Kreek's wheezing neck.

There's no escaping from this one. He's also decently sure he might have dislocated a shoulder or two.

"And that's the match!" The announcer's voice sweeps over them like a finishing gloss, just a few moments later. "The winner is Tommy!"

Tommy rolls off of Kreek. There's no more words exchanged between them.

Kreek does end up needing a regeneration potion for his shoulder and bruised ribs. They shake hands afterwards.

~\*~

“Well,” Techno says. “That was good.”

Tommy has definitely learned valuable lessons, even if the price has been far too steep.

He takes another sip of water, and sinks back into his chair seat. There’s one more round afterwards, before the day is called done and they’re instructed to return to their lodgings until tomorrow.

“Others have done better,” Jocelyn says.

“*Others* aren’t my brother,” Techno responds.

“Oh? He’s lucky to have such a loving sibling then.”

*And one who has enough money to afford this seat,* goes unsaid. But given their previous conversations, the thought hangs like an invisible specter.

“Hm,” Techno says, because he’s really not sure how to equate “loving sibling” with himself.

Well. Another mystery for another time.

The next round passes without much fanfare. Techno gathers himself and his belongings- though there’s not much, besides the golden keycard that is his ticket - and makes his way to find Tommy and Ranboo.

~\*~

The next day, Techno finds himself in the same seat, with Jocelyn beside him once more. This time she’s the early one, notes already covering the table.

It doesn’t take as long as yesterday for the rounds to begin.

“Let’s hope all our remaining contestants have had a good night’s sleep,” the announcer booms. “But the flowers await no one, so we’ll get straight into our next round - and this is a bit of an odd one, so hang in there, folks - it’s Finnster versus Hannah!”

“Oh gods,” Techno mutters. He was in a tournament with Finnster as one of the teammates, once.

Finnster saunters into the arena first. He’s forgone the chainmail armor, which a few past contestants have done before. Bringing your own armor isn’t allowed, but not wearing any is.

Instead of chainmail, Finnster wears a sunflower yellow dress frilled with red, and stitched on are more decorations than on a wedding cake. Rows of pearls, soft fabric orchids, a giant fluffy yellow bowtie in bright blond hair.

The dress extends just beyond his knees. Finnster has on at least knee length white socks, and his feet are capped with polished dress shoes, the heels at least a hand high. He twirls - admittedly gracefully - and gives the surrounding crowd a cheerful wave all the while.

“Wow,” Jocelyn says. “That’s one way to make sure you get remembered.”

“This isn’t as bad as last time,” Techno breaths out slowly. Last time, Finnster had dressed as a female version of... *him*, like the Blood God has become the love interest of some dating comic . Techno wishes he could scrub the newly resurfacing memories of that pink and red monstrosity Finnster had called his “armor”.

“You know him?”

“Don’t remind me.”

Techno doesn’t even care about the dresses. He’d just rather not relive those memories again.

He turns to observe Hannah.

Hannah is a young woman, maybe mid-20s, with long brown hair. It’s slightly wavy and reflects a waxy sheen in the sunlight - which would make it harder to secure a grip on.

She, unlike her opponent, has accepted the armor.

Techno doesn’t know the crowd’s general reaction, but from the sudden influx of roaring noise, he suspects it isn’t anything tame.

“And let the match begin!” the announcer declares.

Finnster bolts immediately, a yellow streak upon the pale and gray. Hannah lunges after him like a jaguar. Whirrs of dusty sand claw their ankles.

This is how it goes for a full 2 minutes - Finnster, as Techno recalls, isn’t terribly good at fighting. But he does have a knack for getting himself out of tricky situations.

They’re two glinting blurs beneath the arena sun, dazzlingly fast. Many of the audience make impressed noises at the speed of both contestants, twin darts circling the sandscape.

Eventually, Hannah stops to pick up a rock the size of a chicken’s egg. She tosses it up once to test the weight - and then, with a sharp motion, sends it reeling into one of Finnster’s high heeled-shoes.

Finnster tumbles into the gravel with a yelp, arms flailing above a sea of yellow frills. Hannah is on him the next instant, sword pressing not against his neck or stomach, but directly onto the tip of his nose. Her expression is shadowed, from Techno’s angle.

Slowly, looking sheepish, Finnster manages to draw his hands against his head in the symbol of surrender.

“Well, there you all have it - Hannah is the winner of this round!” the announcer’s voice booms cheerfully.

“I hope my professor doesn’t think I’m exaggerating my report,” Jocelyn mutters.

“I’ll give you a witness statement and signature if you want,” Techno replies.

~\*~

The next few rounds pass without anywhere near the flare of the first. Half of them are practically the same tactics and directions, though Ranboo still watches with rapt attention at Tommy’s side.

Once the first level of preliminaries are over, a short break is announced before the second begins. Ranboo breaks off to talk to other participants - and former participants. At least losers are still allowed into the gallery.

Tommy takes the time to hunch his elbows over the railing and take a short nap.

When the second preliminaries begin, they cycle through a few names Tommy doesn't know until Purpled's is mentioned.

Purpled wins his round almost as fast as he won his previous one, and with the same strategy.

*It's not that they don't know what he'll do, Tommy observes. They're just too slow to counter it.*

When Tommy's name is called, it's 4 rounds after Purpled's.

"And next - Tommy versus Hannah!"

Oh, Hannah. Her first round hadn't exactly shown much of how she fights - just that she, like Tommy, is aware of the arena itself. He hopes this turns out interesting.

He takes a deep breath, smiles to Ranboo in acknowledgement of his encouraging whispers, and makes his way towards the tunnel.

~\*~

Techno is chewing on a piece of fried lobster when Tommy is called up again.

Tommy doesn't attack when the round begins, but he doesn't run either. Instead, he assumes a defensive position.

It's smart. From the display of speed Hannah had shown from her first round, it's unlikely Tommy would be able to outrun her long, the way he did his previous round. But he's also going in blind about her fighting style.

Hannah, meanwhile, twirls her sword a few times while circling Tommy, eyes narrowed like a hawk.

Tommy begins the first strike. A feint left, a lunge right. Hannah slams her blade to block it in time, and holds her ground firmly. Tommy leaps back before she can counterstrike.

Testing each other out, then. Speed, reactions, fighting patterns. Techno nods as Tommy backs away until he's against a boulder, sword held close to his chest. It'll make him harder to pin down, the way so many other contestants have lost.

Hannah circles him, again. She tries a few more darting blows - each time, Tommy manages to block, his foot position secured by the rock behind him.

She's fast. Very fast. Faster than Tommy, Techno would dare wager. But Tommy is in the better defending position here.

Then, Hannah hunches her shoulders up, drops to a lower crouch - and kicks the arena sand directly into Tommy's face. She's attacking against a moment later, sword bearing down on Tommy's side.

Tommy lets out a hoarse yell Techno barely catches, even from his front row position that lets him see even the sheens of sweat on their faces.

The blow slams with a dull clinking sound and Tommy is sent sprawling in a billow of thin sand. Hannah is on him the next instant, an armored boot on his stomach, sword knocking his arms down like twigs.

Tommy struggles, but from that position Techno knows it's almost impossible to get up when the arms are incapacitated. The boot is too far into his stomach to wrench out of the grip without risk of injury, and his feet kick into nothing but lingering dust.

Techno's hands twitch. He brushes aside the instinct to vault into the arena and slam Hannah away himself.

Another few seconds of increasingly slower struggling passes before the announcer finally booms, "And that is the round! The winner is Hannah!"

Hannah steps back and lowers her sword. Tommy stands up, faintly gasping, but from what Techno can tell there isn't any major injuries beyond the few bruises and maybe a cracked rib. Those are what regeneration potions are for.

As they shake hands, Tommy actually has a smile on his face. An almost relieved sort of smile, as though he had been expecting something cold and hard in the aftermath of defeat and found a pleasant surprise instead. There's a laxness to his posture Techno knows would not have accompanied him in the years before.

Before Tommy turns to follow Hannah out of the arena, however, there's that moment of familiar tenseness - and that's when he raises to meet Techno's eyes.

He's searching for something. Something from Techno, which Techno doesn't know the parameters of.

But - in the previous round. Techno had smiled at Tommy. He had tried to be encouraging. Tommy had been doing good - he had done good this round too. He had made smart decisions and put up a good fight.

Techno gives that same attempt at an encouraging smile again.

Tommy relaxes, nods, and disappears into the arena tunnel.

~\*~

Techno isn't disappointed. Or if he is, he's hiding it very well, and he still thinks Tommy didn't completely screw up that fight or whatever.

That's good! That's really good! That's fucking great! No one is mad about anything!

Tommy downs the small vial of regeneration potion he's offered in the "gearing station", where chainmail armor and wood swords of all shapes and sizes are laid out in the tunnel from the arena to the participant's gallery. He tosses his sword back onto the pile and unclasps his armor - wincing as sand spills from between the links. He resists the urge to claw at his still-scratchy eyes as well.

"Good fight," Hannah says to him simply before slipping back into the throng of participants and former participants at the end of the tunnel, leaving him to his futile effort of brushing all the sand from his face and hair.

“That *was* really good,” the person overseeing the armor and weapon distribution offers. “Lots of interesting strategy there.”

Tommy shrugs, though his heart calms a little further at the words.

They pale in comparison to balm of soothingness Techno’s smile had applied, however.

It’s alright. Losing is alright. There is nothing at stake, and Tommy has faced far more devastating losses than this.

This tournament is a game he had signed himself up for, after all. The consequences are practically nothing, and Tommy will quell the initial flare of burning shame and panic he had felt until it is nothing but a vaguely embarrassing memory.

~\*~

Now that both of them are out, Tommy and Ranboo are free to lounge on their seats, occasionally joking with each other. This is how it goes for the rest of the day, until the quarterfinals and up are announced for tomorrow.

On the beginning of the third day, they buy a basket of fried shrimp and onions to snack on. The rounds pass by, they watch, and they laugh and comment.

When the final round is announced, it is Purpled versus Hannah, like Tommy suspected it would be. He shoves a shrimp into his mouth and crunches in anticipation.

Purpled bolts forward as soon as the announcer declares “begin!”, even faster than usual - he’s definitely picked up, after watching the previous rounds, that Hannah much faster than his usual opponents.

Unlike all those before her who had tried to duck away and failed, however, Hannah kicks forward as well to meet him, just a miniscule of a moment later.

They crash into each other and end up flailing into the sand, limbs tangled and chainmail clinking warningly against one another. Purpled eventually manages to raise his sword against Hannah’s throat, only for a hand to sink into soft hair and yank his head sharply.

Purpled’s body follows the movement, swung like a doll, but he twists out of the grasp and manages to stumble up, expression grim and sand-stained. Hannah mirrors him, almost exactly.

A moment later, they’re scrabbling in the sand again, like a pair of tumbling kittens.

“This is... not how I imagined the final fight would go,” Ranboo says. They both munch thoughtfully on their shrimp and onions while Hannah slams a shoulder into Purpled’s incoming knee, which sends them both careening into a boulder.

“If it works, it works,” Tommy shrugs. Through the chaos, only Purpled has managed to hang onto his sword. He makes another attempt at jabbing it into Hannah’s stomach as they lay against the sand, but Hannah meets the blade with her hands and *yanks* again.

The sword rips violently out of Purpled’s grasp.

Everything hangs on a precipice as Purpled starts clawing his way to his feet, Hannah half-sitting, half-lying beside him holding a sword two-handed and by the blade - and then, she slams the hilt into



Purpled's stomach like a thunderbolt.

Purpled collapses back into the sand without a sound.

"Oh," Ranboo says, sounding faint.

"Oh shit," Tommy agrees. Purpled will definitely need a good swig of regeneration potion after this.

"Well - that's the match!" the announcer calls with a hasty edge. "We wouldn't want anyone getting seriously hurt here - really, we had to pay so much in legal damages last time this event turned fatal - but anyway!"

He clears his throat.

"The winner of the final round - and thus the 50th Tournament of the Flowers - is Hannah! Let's all give her congratulations for becoming, dare I say, the Queen of the Flowers!"

"This makes up for us losing so early," Ranboo says. "That was - something."

"Oh, definitely," Tommy agrees through another mouthful of crispy shrimp.

## Chapter End Notes

fight scenes are... not my specialty lmao. i dont really recall having written extended fight scenes before - or actually, only like twice and im not sure those counted, but i tried. let me know how you thought? do keep in mind this fic trends towards the realistic, so while long, flashy battles have a place in some literature, it doesnt really fit the vibes of this one.

hey remember that mcc where flnnster cosplayed as techno-chan? good times

fried shrimp without the heads taste fucking amazing, especially with some salt and pepper. The shells crunch so nicely with the flesh. mmmh makes me want some again lmao.

also, jocelyn! it's rare i ever give this much time or development to a non-cc, but someone had to talk techno into more realizations and questions. she's based off an irl friend of mine - too much attention to a technically-oc, or nah? what do you think? i gave her this courtesy because she's like one of the few people irl willing to discuss world history and international politics with me

# to be proud of who we've been

## Chapter Notes

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See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“You ask him.”

“No, you’ve actually met him, *you* ask him.”

“It’s about *your* country!”

“You two,” Techno finally growls through what is probably an incoming headache, to Tommy’s slight twinge of guilt, “need to shut up and both ask him, or we’re leaving.”

With a groan, Tommy reaches over to grab Ranboo by his shirt collar and begins dragging. Ranboo stumbles along with only a mild grumble of protest.

“Hey! Purpled!” Tommy calls to the man (and oh fuck, Purpled’s a *man* now, just like him), who’s standing near a sweetcakes stall. Tommy has tracked him down to here after the tournament, and thankfully, he hasn’t disappeared yet.

Purpled turns and, when he sees Tommy, gives him a long, slow blink. A half eaten sweetcake is in his hand, center coalesced with honey. A tiny dribble leaks towards the ground.

He looks them both up and down. A frown twists onto his expression.

“Do I know you?” he finally asks, though Tommy notices how his gaze lingers on Ranboo for a moment too long.

Figures that he wouldn’t recognize Tommy. They never talked much before, and it’s been a long year and a half.

Instead of leading with himself, Tommy points at Ranboo. “Surely you’ve recognized him already? Kinda hard to forget that jumpiness.”

Ranboo shoots Tommy a dirty look.

“The person I defeated in the first round,” Purpled says, raising an eyebrow. “Jumpiness didn’t save you there.”

“That’s not the point,” Ranboo sighs. “You were - I heard - um-”

“Purpled, when did you leave New L’Manberg?” Tommy asks. “Right after killing that wither and snagging the star, or sometime later?”

Purpled stiffens, eyes suddenly darting as though there might be assassins in the crowd just like him, ready to strike at any moment.

“W-what are you talking about?” he hisses, softer. More honey splatters to the ground from his sweetcake as his hands begin twitching.

One thing about Purpled had stuck out to Tommy after they had originally met and talked those few times. For all his skill with combat and movement, unlike so many others Tommy had been surrounded by - Purpled is a terrible actor.

Maybe he had found that refreshing, despite how little Purpled ever wanted to do with the war itself. Despite how much Purpled had avoided them all, unless they had dangled a giant sack of money as incentive.

“Don’t play dumb,” Tommy says. “I was there too.”

“I wasn’t,” Ranboo chirps. “But I heard all about it! A lot! *All the time!*”

Something clicks in Purpled’s expression.

“Ranboo?” he asks, voice now on the edge of disbelief. “Are you-”

“Tubbo Underscore’s Ranboo?” Ranboo finishes. “Yep. Obviously. That’s me, great and amazingly loyal First Lady - Lord - something - of New L’Manberg.”

Tommy’s certain only he can hear the note of bitterness with the words, long buried but ever lingering.

“I’m way more interesting,” Tommy decides to cut in.

“Bet.”

Techno’s voice sends them all startling back.

“You - how-” Purpled stares into Techno’s hulking frame, the shadow of which now falls over Tommy like a black curtain.

Tommy grins.

Purpled’s gaze darts back to him. “You’re Tommy. Tommy Innit.”

“Pleasure to meet you,” Tommy mocks. A thought crosses his mind. “What, wanna drag me back to be Dream’s pet canary?”

“What? No, I - I left because-”

“Oh, are we having a party?” another voice chimes.

Tommy turns to Hannah sliding up to Purpled’s side. Something large and conspicuously bouquet-shaped is in her hands, wrapped in a silken red covering.

“Screw off,” Purpled mutters. “I’m having a crisis here.”

But there’s no heat to the words. Hannah laughs and tousles Purpled’s hair.

“You can have your crisis while telling us when you left New L’Manberg,” Techno interrupts.

Purpled takes another step back.

“Friends of yours?” Hannah asks. She shoots Tommy and Techno a warning glare, which Tommy ignores and Techno, he knows, just shrugs off.

“Not - friends,” Purpled mutters. “Knew each other. Back in New L’Manberg. Or I guess it was L’Manberg back then.”

“Really? You never told me you were involved in that mess!” Hannah reaches out, as though to give Purpled a hug, but he slides out her grip easily.

“Hannah, we’ve known each other for 3 days,” he says. “And we’re going to part after this.”

“He was *barely* involved in L’Manberg,” Tommy corrects. “Showed up to fight against *us* overthrowing Schlatt, and then decided to switch sides midway for some reason-”

“I’m a mercenary, I know when a side is losing-”

“-and then presumably fucked off with a nether star.”

“That nether star covered the costs of me getting out of there so I didn’t have to assassinate anyone close to your precious Tubbo,” Purpled grumbled.

“What?” Ranboo’s eyes blow wide. “Assassinate - you-”

“Well - yeah.” Purpled frowns. He takes another bite of his sweetcake. “This was around January, early February last year - Dream wanted me to kill a few people. One of them was Tubbo. I said no and skedaddled, because I’m not an idiot.”

“Wise decision,” Techno says.

“It looks like you two had the same idea,” Purpled notes, eyes glancing from Tommy to Techno. “Kinda surprised you stuck together, though. Would have thought you’d be at each other’s throats after the whole betrayal thing.”

“We - uh-”

“We’ve worked out our differences,” Tommy says, saving Techno’s mildly embarrassed reply. “Mostly. Besides, since Dream has a bounty on me - it’s good to be ‘round the one person who’s defeated him, yeah?”

“Actually, Techno’s not the only person to have defeated the current Dream,” Hannah says. “He recently got beat by a new challenger. Apple or Lime or some name like that.”

“It’s Fruit,” Purpled says. “Fruitberries.”

“Weird name,” Tommy says. He shifts to the side a bit, enough to catch the slight frown on Techno’s face. A frown of concern, and recognition.

Huh.

“Purpled, why don’t you introduce me to you... not-friends?” Hannah asks.

Purpled tilts his head.

“Tommy Innit-” he points to Tommy.

“Technoblade-” he points to Techno.

“And Ranboo Underscore.” He nods in Ranboo’s direction.

Hannah whistles lowly. “Impressive resume of acquaintances you have.”

“Tell one person and we’ll make sure you can’t another,” Techno says.

Hannah laughs. “I decided to avoid New L’Manberg and the Dream Kingdom specifically because I don’t feel like getting caught up in their troubles.”

“Wise decision,” Ranboo says, tone almost sarcastic. Tommy elbows him.

“Anyway, Tommy,” Hannah says. “I’d like to say, you fought well in our match. That was quite enjoyable.”

“I’d say the same thing, but I got fucking sand in my eyes,” Tommy says, grinning back.

Hannah smiles easily. “Well, someone had to win the round. Here, why don’t you take this as a little apology from me.”

She rolls back the silken covering of the bouquet, plucks a few multi-colored tulips and orchids from the bundle, and hands them to Tommy.

Tommy blinks. “Aren’t you going to sell this?”

“I don’t need the money,” Hannah says, sounding amused. “But you seem like the type to enjoy flowers.”

Ranboo and Techno both snort a laugh. Tommy scowls at them, but reaches to accept the flowers by their fragile stems.

They feel light as butterflies in his hands, colors blue to red to pink to shimmering silver. He’s seen illustrations of them before - the prism tulips *do* have a lustrous beauty to them the illustrations can’t convey. The names of the orchid species elude him, meanwhile. Once he presses them into his book collection, he’ll have to find references from their bookshelf section on flora.

“Uh - thanks,” Tommy finally remembers to say. “I - yeah. Guess I do like flowers.”

A heaviness rushes out of him with the admittance, leaving him light as the mini-bouquet in his hands.

Wow. Holy fuck. He actually admitted he liked something!

...he’s also starting to sound like Wilbur.

Tommy glances at Techno, who digs their ender chest out from his satchel and presses the switch that opens it to full size.

He decides to wrap them in a bit of loose paper first. Their decay slows in the ender chest’s cold environment, so there will be time to properly press and store them in his book collection during the voyage home.

“Purpled, why don’t you take the rest of these?” Hannah says. She holds the rest of the flowers out, violet silk ribbons and all.

“I don’t need flowers.”

“You said you want to settle in a proper home soon! These are good decoration!”

“They’re-” Purpled rolls his eyes, but accepts Hannah’s outstretched bouquet and stalks over to Techno’s ender chest to deposit it.

“You can have a very expensive garden with your house,” Tommy snickers. “Would recommend.”

“You would know something about that, wouldn’t you?” Ranboo sighs.

Tommy only grins back.

~\*~

They end up spending the next hour trying a few last game stands and buying interesting-looking snacks from food vendors.

It is Techno who spots the stand which sells the seeds of various flowers, some of which Tommy does not have growing around their home.

Tommy, of course, buys nearly everything he can get his hands on. Techno is more than glad to provide him the funds to do so.

Eventually, Purpled and Hannah both bid them farewell, indicating they’re returning to their hotel to rest for tomorrow’s journey out of the city.

Techno, Tommy, and Ranboo, meanwhile, agree there’s little point in spending another night.

There are a few people down by the harbor this close to sunset, and no one bats an eye when they all climb aboard *The Camarvan* and Techno unfurls the sails. Tommy is the one who unties the ropes in a few deft movements.

The wind is blowing in just the right direction tonight. The air is cool, dry but comfortable. As their sails begin to lift, Tommy pulls his flower collection book from the ender chest, as well as the small collection Hannah had gifted him.

Then, he begins pressing and preserving beneath the light of a full moon.

## Chapter End Notes

yeeah this is a... very short chapter. i tried. i really did. but whichever way i looked at it the scenes following this just has a disconnect with this chapter’s scenes that makes it awkward without some sort of barrier between them, so those scenes get their own chapter it is

i reply to comments live! [twitch](#).

[tumblr](#) and [twitter](#) for questions and art!



# should come home with an arm full of yarn

## Chapter Notes

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It's been nearly three weeks since Techno, Tommy, and Ranboo have left. The time passes like the weather, calm and open skies, and the occasional burst of rainstorm thunder.

They're in Sanctuary a bit earlier than usual today. Wilbur leans against Phil as they sit on a bench old and water-eaten as the pier wood below, both gazing upon the ocean horizons. Phil's wings are curled around Wilbur, and himself, like they so often are now. Clementine is on the far stony beach beyond, chasing seagulls.

Few words are exchanged between them this morning. That's alright. The air breezes with salt and seaweed's wetness, and Wilbur hums a song of old siren legends. Phil's cloak is thrown over them both; it's just a shade cold enough for such a thing.

When *The Camarvan* is sighted, it is in its slow glide towards the harbor.

Phil waits until the hull is nearly brushing the docks before standing. He helps Wilbur up a moment later, arms steady, and slides the cane beneath Wilbur's hand in a practiced movement.

"Hello," Techno greets them as he throws Phil *The Camarvan*'s ropes. Pink ribbons of hair flutter around his shoulders.

"Hello back," Phil says easily as he ties the ropes to the dock's pole. "Had a nice trip?"

"Very," Tommy says, popping his head into view. He must have been sitting down.

Wilbur notes the faint smears of blue around his fingers, and wonders what he had been doing on the way back.

"It was nice, yeah." Ranboo climbs onto the pier first, careful to avoid the ocean spray.

"That's good to hear," Wilbur hums.

"Great. No one died or got mortally injured or lost any belovedly precious pets," Techno says, rolling his eyes in a move just hesitant enough for Wilbur to detect the tremble beneath the sarcasm. He hopes it's just standard, signature Techno worry, and not anything that could crumble onto them.

Then, Techno claps his hands. "Let's find Hbomb to bother for breakfast, since I presume you two didn't prepare any. I'm starving."

"Right - hey!" Tommy yelps as Clementine suddenly leaps onto the pier, barrels into his chest, and begins aggressively licking his face.



~\*~

Hbomb accepts their request for breakfast easily enough once Techno presents the yellow-finned tuna he had caught and spiked just a hour before arriving.

His face had morphed into an expression deeply relieved when Ranboo stepped through his house doors. Whether it's simply because Ranboo is placed as his responsibility, or for something deeper as well, Techno doesn't know.

Either way, the three - Wilbur, Phil, and Hbomb - settle into old rhythms easily enough around the table once the cooking is done and served. Somewhere along the way Tommy and Ranboo begin their recountment of Risenulf and the tournament.

Techno sits in contented silence. Occasionally, he slips bits of tuna below the table, where Clementine's eager tongue swipes it up.

Wilbur brushes his shoulder on their way out the door. Techno turns to move out his brother's way, but a hand draws him closer.

It then proceeds to wrap around him, steady.

"Welcome home," Wilbur grins. "I missed you."

Techno blinks. And then, he dares give a small grin back.

"Thanks," he says. "I missed you too."

~\*~

"This is... a lot of origami," Tommy says.

Techno and Wilbur's room is now a sky full of folded art paper, like colorful stars sailing lightly back and forth with the window breeze. Cranes and herons, tulips and roses, thin ribbons and spiraling eastern dragons of shimmer-thin paper, hung by spider silk stretched to near invisible translucency.

Some of the origami are low enough to brush his knees like curtain tassel. Still others are so tiny and stung to the ceiling he has to squint to make out any dots of colors and shadow.

Tommy thinks walking through this scattered, multi-dimensional curtain of gently cupped paper might be the closest thing to flying among the stars in this world.

"I got a bit carried away," Techno says, refusing to meet Wilbur's chasing gaze. A snicker rises in Tommy's throat, which he decides to mercifully force down.

"How do you two get anywhere?" he asks instead. They would be brushing aside paper and string with every step. He'll have to watch his step even more than usual when he comes into this room now.

"With mild difficulty," Wilbur says.

"I *offered* to take them down--"

Wilbur waves a hand. "And I don't want you to! It's prettier than you to look at."

“I - what - well, I’m not exactly *pretty*.”

“Techno, I’ve met plenty of young woman and men who would say otherwise.”

“Of course you two would turn your room into a fucking display case just ‘cause it’s *pretty*,” Tommy says, catching both their attentions.

Good. He’d rather not listen to Wilbur ramble about how many people are supposedly swooning over Techno’s beauty.

...the room *does* look very nice, though.

Maybe he’ll ask Techno to hang some origami in his and Phil’s room too. Just one or two.

~\*~

Wilbur awakes with his limbs heavy, eyes closed, and throat burning.

Oh. It’s been a... long while. Since that happened.

But he can hear Techno’s quiet mumblings. They angled their beds to be closer to each other’s nearly a year ago, and neither have wanted to move them back. Even if Wilbur’s sleeptalking apparently drives Techno a bit crazy.

A hand, warm and soft, rests itself on Wilbur’s chest. Speak of which - or is it think of which? Do such distinctions merit significant dwellings on, beyond in the dull scrape of boredom?

“You’re awake,” Techno says.

Wilbur wants to respond. He can’t.

“Oh. Like that sort of awake.”

“Like what sort of awake?” Tommy’s voice rings from the door.

“Sleep paralysis,” Techno says. “Or, the approximation of. I’m still not sure this is anything diagnosable. It’s not - it’s definitely not a normal case.”

Wilbur’s throat isn’t burning anymore. As much. He can still feel the fire-rough rope chafing and chafing and *scraping off flesh like a slab of glacier collapsing* - but the feeling recedes as it always does.

Slowly, his lungs clear as well. In seconds - *1 2 3, 4 5 6* - and minutes - *10 measures, 20 measures*.

It used to feel like hours, waking like this. Since Techno and Tommy have been watching out for signs, they keep him company with touch and voice. The time he spends immobile goes by far quicker now.

“Hello,” he croaks eventually.

“Hello to you too,” Tommy says. The side of Wilbur’s bed dips - and then, Tommy’s arms are around him, his head on Wilbur’s chest.

“Feeling better?” Techno asks.

Wilbur hums. It's an easier motion. He manages to work his arm over Tommy's back.

"Me too," Tommy yawns. "Me too."

~\*~

Clementine has found a new favorite hobby.

Tommy hands her a bag full of flower seeds to snap her teeth around the loose lip of - then she begins sprinting wildly around the grass and gardens until it's nearly empty, the chickens held back from pecking at the scraps.

"You know most of those seeds are going to waste, right?" Phil asks.

Tommy shrugs. "Not like I'm hand-planting every one. Might as well let her have fun with the extras."

This year, Techno has thankfully planted less potatoes and more actually respectable crops, like carrots. And squash. And mushrooms in the cave the horses used to be stationed at, for some reason.

"They're good nutrients," Techno had defended when Tommy asked. He's probably looking for a new flora-based experiment to get unnecessarily competitive over once the potato book is finished.

Phil takes over the trellis plants again, though last year's eggplants and beans don't need replanting - only tending to.

Wilbur is still strangely obsessed with his ant colonies. He insists that, apparently, they attack pests. Tommy thinks his creepy animal focus has just turned from fish to insects.

Sometimes, he wishes his brothers were a little less strange about their interests. Not that he would begrudge them strange interests over dangerous ones.

It's summer by now, and many of the flowers around their house are now in full bloom - several grown from last year's seeds and bulbs. Tommy soon spots several goats and deer leaping over their canals to start chewing on them, to the point where he starts training Clementine to keep watch and defend.

One day, the realization hits him that he's training their dog to defend their fucking *flowers* of all things. And the wild bees that mill about. Her fur is too thick for most stingers to pierce anyway, even if she sheds it everywhere, including once in the stone oven Phil carved into a cliff outside. How she managed that, Tommy has no idea.

The large - and moderate-sized - herbivores of the area learn to leave their gardens alone eventually, however. Tommy considers that a win.

~\*~

"We're out of ghastr tears," Phil says. "And also running low on blaze rods."

Techno's first instinct is to turn towards Wilbur.

They lit a Nether portal in the ravine beneath them a long while ago, just in case. But they've never had a need for it - until now, apparently.

“What about prepared potions?” Wilbur asks.

“We still have some healing, speed, night vision, and water breathing,” Phil counts out. “But regeneration and invisibility are down to two bottles each.”

That’s not enough. Nowhere near enough, actually. Especially regeneration - healing is better for surface level wounds, cuts and bruises and burns, but more often it is internal damage to bone, muscle, and especially organs that prove to be fatal. For those, downing regeneration is far more effective.

Ghast tears are also, Techno knows, difficult to acquire on the best of days. There’s rumors of some people cracking the secrets to *farming* them, but as far as he knows they remain outlandish rumors and nothing more.

Blaze rods, meanwhile - blaze rods mean visiting a nether fortress, unless they want to made do with what incredibly little the people of Sanctuary are willing to give up.

Those people have an aversion to selling alchemic or magic-specific ingredients for some reason, and Techno hasn’t ever seen a visiting merchant offer any either. Which is rather strange, now that he thinks about it - but that’s a thought to explore another time.

A nether fortress would also mean keeping on hand fire resistance potions, and potentially using them. Thankfully, his fire resistant sets of armor and clothing are still around.

Though Techno can handle himself without them just fine, and he imagines he’ll be the one harvesting from the blazes at any rate.

“How many fire res do we have?” Tommy asks, coming to the same cue.

“Around seven bottles,” Phil says, making an almost apologetic face. “I should have more, but-”

“It’s not your fault,” Techno says. “Potions get used up. It’s what they’re for. Besides, that inventory includes what I had prepared before the battle as well.”

Techno had given most of the potions he had prepared last time for the Pogtopians before the Battle of Manberg, their ragtag army of a few thousand storming the capital with Tommy and Wilbur at the helm. He’s not sure if it was worth it - on one hand, it helped them win the battle, which was what his brothers had wanted. It helped them retake L’Manberg and fly its flag above the hills of their country once more.

Wilbur would have blown it up and asked to be killed regardless of whether they had won or not, though.

There’s no use dwelling on past contingencies now. Techno shifts to be closer to the rest of his family, all of them gathered on the ring of couches in their lanterlit living room.

“Well,” he says. “I suppose we’ll have to get more. Time works differently in the Nether, but I shouldn’t be gone more than a week-”

“Techno,” Wilbur says, closing their small distance with an outstretched hand to his shoulder. “*We* shouldn’t be gone for more than a week.”

“*We* as in *us* and not *you*,” Tommy corrects, scowling at Wilbur. “You’re not going into the Nether.”

Wilbur stares for a few silent moments.

“Yes, I am,” he says finally. “Especially if you three are going.”

“That’s because it’s risky to brave the Nether alone,” Phil says. “You can’t-”

“I won’t be too slow,” Wilbur says. His voice is clear, confident, but the hand on Techno’s shoulder is trembling. “I - I can help. Keep watch. It’s dangerous to speed through the Nether anyway.”

Tommy’s scowl deepens. “We’re not risking it on a-”

“You’re all risking yourselves by going there-”

“Wilbur can come,” Phil suddenly says.

Techno and Tommy whip to him with twin expressions of disbelief.

After everything, how could *Phil* possibly think that Wilbur should - that he can - just throw himself into reckless danger again?

Phil stares back impassively. Techno knows they’re all hiding more reason than they appear to, so he reluctantly waits for him to speak.

“Wilbur’s an adult,” Phil says. “And he knows the risks. It’s not a choice we can make for him.”

Technically, they *can* make the choice for him. Physically restrain him from coming along.

But even thinking like that makes Techno sick, as though his bones rot with disgust at the idea. From the helpless look Tommy gives him, the feeling isn’t exclusive.

Wilbur is quiet. He’s staring at Phil with something like realization - and then, relief. Techno wonders what that’s about.

“Wilbur, you don’t have to prove you can be useful,” Tommy says. “You’re plenty great around here, and if you get hurt or - or...”

“I know we’re all supposed to be responsible for ourselves,” Wilbur says when Tommy falls silent. “You know - adults and such.”

Tommy makes a protesting noise, and so does Techno, but Wilbur holds up a hand and they quiet again.

“But we’ve made each other our responsibilities, haven’t we? And if we hold ourselves responsible for everyone else’s safety, then - it has to go both ways.”

“Wilbur,” Techno says. “No offense, but-”

“I know I’ll slow you guys down,” Wilbur says. “But it’s a bad idea to rush through the Nether anyway, like I said. I - I’ve been practicing. I don’t think I’ll be as much of a liability as you think.”

Techno remains quiet. Facts are, he does think Wilbur will hinder more than help in his current physical state. He’s unable to move faster than a steady walk, despite how adept he might have become at traversing dangerous terrain.

“It’s also better now than later,” Phil says.

That brings a contemplative frown to Techno. That's - that's a good point, actually.

Wilbur is nodding.

"Like - like what kind of later?" Tommy asks. It's clear he'd rather Wilbur never enter the Nether again.

"The Nether is a good place to hide, escape, or travel through for desperate men," Phil says.

"Sometimes, staying in the Overworld can have a greater cost. When - if - that day comes, we'd rather Wilbur have experience moving through the Nether with his restrictions."

"The three of us are more than suited to handle the place on our own," Techno adds, turning the logistics in his head over. "If Wilbur has to get used to it, might as well be when we're around and in no rush. He'll be carrying some potions just in case, of course. I think we still have a few ender pearls left too."

Endermen are so rare nowadays, compared to how many the Overworld housed 20 years ago. And almost all concentrated in the southern hemisphere - a pity they don't have more pearls stored up.

Wilbur's hand is still trembling, but a little less now.

"I - alright." Tommy blinks. "Uh - not that I'm giving permission or anything, 'cause I know it's really your choice and I can't make you, but like-"

"I get it." Wilbur smiles, that warm expression that always wraps Techno in its soothing, all-encompassing reassurance. "And I know you're worried, like I was when you first entered the Nether. We'll all be careful."

"And you should have a Notch apple with you," Techno adds. "Just in case."

To that, Wilbur agrees as well.

~\*~

Techno is decided to enter first. The Nether portal's aura feels uneasy to others, he knows - strange and unsettling, a tear through the fabric of two worlds which should not have been conjoined.

To Techno, it is not just cold uneasiness which burrows its way into him, beneath his skin.

To Techno, a Nether portal lit is like a giant tunnel worm has sunk its clawed teeth into his body and ripped out everything in one giant, hollow motion. A shell sucked bare. It is like the monster beyond the hallway, around the corner - not of the unknown which plagues the mind, but even worse - of that which is known too well.

He *knows*, on levels too deep and familiar and intimate beneath his consciousness, how utterly, horribly *wrong* this void-purple destruction of the natural order is.

Those of the Overworld crossing into the Nether, and those of the Nether crossing into the Overworld, do not stay where their existence is wrong.

Overworld denizens are not meant to withstand the heat and humidity, nor survive scalding lava burns. The Nether spurns their presence.

Nether denizens are not meant to breathe the Overworld air, each inhale a new dose of poison, and each drop of water like acid eating away their being. The Overworld spurns their presence.

Techno is the monstrous crossing of two worlds which should not have crossed each other. He is an abomination in the truest sense of the word - in the universal sense.

He's made his peace with it. He's not hung over his nature, driven mad like so many other Nether hybrids, drifting between two worlds and unable to survive in either. He got lucky with his expressed traits, the combination of characteristics from whoever his parents were - there's a reason so many Nether hybrids die in the womb or in early childhood, far more than even other hybrids.

But the instincts are still there, screaming beneath his mind, and as usual it takes the briefest moment to wrench his will back into his own hands and stalk through the portal.

The Nether is hot and full of lava, like it always is. He steps into a warped forest.

The ground is almost spongy, the fungus-like flora scurrying against his boots with a sensation like a thousand crawling centipedes.

Techno glances around. There's a lava lake in the far distance behind him, where the forest cliffs, and in front the lands open up to a wider plains-like area. In the very edge of his vision there's the beginnings of a nether waste. It's southward, judging from the position of the warped moss - which, unlike Overworld moss, does actually have direction-dependent growing.

Not that the two species are actually anywhere close on the taxonomy tree - he's not sure the Nether's flora can even be considered fungus, let alone plants. They're something completely separate, biologically.

A few endermen croak nearby, shorter and redder and more lava-resistant than their Overworld or End counterparts.

Techno strains his ears, listening. The plaintive cries of ghasts remain absent even after several minutes.

Nodding, he steps back into the portal.

"Coast's clear as it can be," he informs his family before stepping back again, fighting a shudder. The sooner he gets the portal crossings over with, the better.

Phil joins him soon after, followed by Tommy and Wilbur.

They set off for the direction of the barren wastes.

## Chapter End Notes

not me coming up with an entire technobackstory and piglin worldbuilding while writing this  
haha nope

in other news the number of fics in this au is now going from 3 to 4. there's this fic, Between the Pieces (aka Tommy backstory piece which is already out! Check it out in the series list this fic is

under!), the Tubbo and Ranboo pov short fic that will be started after Valley of Serenity is finished, and then a Techno-centric story/backstory-revealing thing set some time after the end of this fic that'll delve into Nether worldbuilding and other stuff.

fuck why can't i restrain myself

as always, comments/kudos and feedback in general is very welcome!



# when i was a child there were gods, and they were not kind

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Not long into exploring the nether wastes, they come across a sign. It's metal, the pole and plates rusted with red dust.

*Nether Fortress - southeast, 0.5 leagues.*

*Soul Sand Valley - east, 2 leagues.*

"Well," Phil says. "That makes things easier."

Most nether fortresses are built and inhabited by piglin societies. Those, Overworlders stay far away from unless they're looking to trade. Some fortresses are completely abandoned, crawling with dead souls and fiery blazes left to multiply unchecked - incredibly dangerous, but usually a necessity to brave for potion ingredients.

A rare few, however, have not only been fully explored by Overworlders but also converted into semi-safe resting points. Blazes are corralled into farming areas, and wither skeletons kept at bay by fences and drawbridges. The infrastructure built by an Overworld city or state, with enough people and resources to hold down fort.

There's usually even a few people in the most commonly trafficked ones, guards rotated in and out of watch duty. They usually charge for admission to the few people willing to traverse the Nether in the first place, but it'll still be much safer than an unexplored fortress that could take several days to find.

Theoretically, Techno could also barter with piglins for the materials they need. But he's rusty enough on the few piglin languages he does know, nevermind what will happen if he comes across a settlement that speaks something he doesn't understand.

They're wary enough of outsiders anyway. And Techno doesn't want to interact with them anymore than them with him.

"Half a league is doable in an hour if the terrain remains this flat," Techno says.

It's too bad there's practically no paths in the Nether - at least, not ones Overworlders won't likely die travelling. Netherrack is dangerously soft and brittle, and more often than not there's a lava river or lava bubbling beneath. Too much paving in an attempt to smooth a route usually results in large sections of land caving in and dunking whoever was stupid enough to be on it into a very unpleasant and fiery death.

The ground sometimes caves on the weight of the wary, but simply unfortunate as well.

They're all trained to test the terrain, examine for cracks and too-hollow thuds - almost obsessively.

But the price for caution is time. The price for carelessness is death.

Phil's been staying close to Wilbur, their shoulders almost brushing, this entire time. Wilbur does not pull away, like he once might have.

They come across the fortress soon enough - the only entrance into the tunnel-like inside is held high above, with a nether brick platform extending out as a landing area. He can make out the frame of a door; there must be a drawbridge which leads to it. The walls, Techno notes, have obviously patched cracks, and brick lighter than the rest reinforce the foundations.

Definitely human-manned, then, maybe with a few nether hybrids as well. Those are popular recruits to have around some parts.

Phil could theoretically fly them all up in a minute. But if there's people inside, that's a surefire way to become an arrow pincushion. Shoot first and ask questions later is an unfortunately effective survival strategy for Overworlders in this place.

Speaking of which. Phil sighs, but pulls a thin red cloak from his bag and drapes it over his shoulders. The only avian hybrids are those of smaller, more colorful songbirds - the black wings are a dead giveaway he's not one of them.

"They have a bell," Wilbur says. He points a finger.

There is, indeed, a large brass bell hung from raised stone rods at the edge of the platform.

Techno pulls out his crossbow, loads one of the arrows from the quiver attached to his hip, and and shoots.

The sound is fainter than what most would expect, muffled by design. Probably from some mechanism inside the bell itself.

But it does its job. A few moments later, a woman flings open the door and peers from the platform.

"Purpose and affiliation!" she yells down after a moment, though there's little need to. Sound travels better in the Nether than the Overworld, and the distance isn't large enough to smother even casual conversation.

"We need potion supplies!" Phil calls back. "No affiliation with any nation or settlement."

The woman nods. "This fortress is operated by the City of Chester. Temporary housing for travelers is free, but supply gathering is by an hourly rate."

"That's fine," Phil says. He holds out a hand, and a string of gold coins dangle out like a ribbon.

Slowly, the drawbridge - held beneath the tunneled corridor the door leads into - is lowered.

"How long are you four staying?" the woman asks as they're ushered through the fortress.

"Until we have enough blaze rods," Techno says. "And magma cream. Probably a few hours."

Nether wart can be farmed. And he still has a rather sizable wither skull collection - though he doubts these people would let him collect wither skulls anyhow.

"A pound of pure gold per hour in the blaze area," she says. "Collect at your own risk - we get the blaze rods if you die, but your friends get your other stuff. Unless they all die too, in which case we get all of it. If you don't have pure gold, let me see what you do have and we'll calculate a rate."

"These are 4 ounces of pure gold each," Phil says, motioning to the large coins in his hand - a string of 8. He tosses the entire string to the woman, who catches it with an unimpressed look.

Tommy hands Techno a fire resistance potion. They only last half an hour or so, but as Techno is naturally resistant to fire anyways, it's only in case of extreme emergency. They're all at least decently familiar with fighting blazes.

Techno is far more than *decent*. They've all agreed he'll be the one doing the blaze killing while Tommy, Phil, and Wilbur slay far less dangerous magma slimes.

The woman looks mildly disappointed when she realizes Techno is unlikely to die. Techno tamps down the urge to roll his eyes at her. Gear from unlucky travellers are supposed to go towards the city that operates the fortress - but of course, there's always some loot pinching here or there.

At least she has the forwardness to look unapologetic about it.

He does wish he could slice off the hopeful look she gives Wilbur's leg and cane, however.

Another man - a piglin hybrid like Techno - comes to show him the direction of the blaze farms.

Blazes used to roam the nether wastes and crimson forests. Then piglins domesticated some - made them dependent on fortress-cultivated nether wart for survival.

Soul sand, along with wild nether wart species, are now far rarer sights outside soul sand valleys than they used to be - the result of piglins carting it into concentrated population centers for agriculture. Why brave the soul sand valleys, where the air and ground itself sucks the life force from beneath and ghasts are always ready to defend their territory, when they can simply gather it from far safer areas?

As a result, wild growing nether wart became a rarity as well, and the wild blazes that relied on them went extinct. Only the domesticated variants are left. Most are in piglin inhabited fortresses and bastions, farmed for their rods.

Some are now "farmed" by Overworlders, who utilize previous infrastructure built by piglins in the fortresses. "Barns" - a large, hollowed space with a small, tight entrance, for blazes to build their nests and self-populate.

Many suspect blazes are eusocial creatures. Techno thinks they're more like horses or passenger pigeons - instinct drives them to nest and travel together for safety, some remnant of their ancestors' wild instincts that piglins have taken advantage of to make the farming easier.

Either way, while piglins have far more sophisticated systems of killing, Techno simply makes do with this rough set up. He stretches his arms, shifts the weight of his sword in his hand, makes sure his netherite armor - enchanted with fire protection on top of netherite's natural resistance - is fully secured, and ducks through the iron door.

Blazes swarm him immediately, floating down with metallic clatters of rage. A wide sword swing leaves several twitching at his feet.

The room is a giant cavern of netherrack and blazes, around the size of the arena at Risenulf, and the only ways out are either the tightly locked door he came through, or several large holes in the ground.

Into one of those holes, Techno kicks several of the blazes dying at his feet. Then, he continues swinging.

The sheer number of the blazes - at least two thousand fully grown - actually makes dodging fireballs a little easier. They're far more liable to hit each other than him, and when they do it's usually absorbed by his armor.

Techno knows how to cover his weak points so they don't hit skin. Even if they do, it won't do much damage anyway. Blaze fire is extremely tame compared to normal nether fire - another thing domestication has softened.

Techno imagines any normal human doing this would still have a very unpleasant time without a fire resistance potion, however.

There's two hours to kill. Here, in the walls of this cavern with nothing but animals to judge him, Techno doesn't have to worry about perception. He doesn't have to worry about hurting someone he doesn't want to.

He takes a deep breath, and lets his blade loose.

~\*~

"Tommy, *no*."

"But it's so cute," Tommy whines. He tries to gather the tiny magma slime into his arms again, and hisses in pain when it flops through his fingers. As it tries to leap away, he traps it beneath his boot.

"If you keep this up you'll actually get burned," Wilbur says. He's leaning against the wall on his good leg, his cane now tipped like a sword beside him. "We are not keeping a magma slime as a pet."

"But it's tiny! We can have a little glass cage for it--"

"You know what tiny magma slimes grow up to be?" Phil asks. "Big magma slimes. Huge ones. Bigger than our house."

Tommy would call him a liar, except he *has* seen magma slimes as big as that in basalt deltas before. Even bigger, maybe.

The magma slimes in this fortress are all split and killed long before they reach that size, however.

Wilbur flicks his sword-cane thing and slices an incoming magma slime clean in half. It falls to the nether brick floor with twin wet splats - and then both sides begin wriggling. Before they can form into smaller slimes, Wilbur slices them again, and again, and again, until the movements stop.

The oozing red-yellow mess that is left, Phil scoops into a large jar already half-full.

"If you're so attached, we won't kill it," Wilbur says. "But we're not bringing a nether creature home as a pet. Not only is it a fire hazard, it's also animal cruelty."

"Never stopped you before," Tommy mutters. He pauses. "Also, you say that like animal cruelty *isn't* a terrible idea."

Wilbur shrugs. "They're not always mutually inclusive."

Then his mouth flickers into a grin. "Sometimes they are, though. Like what Phil did with Techno!"

"Like I did *what?* "

"Bringing a nether creature home as a pet!" Tommy's eyes light up. "That's what you did with Techno, and that turned out fucking great!"

“Techno is a *person*,” Phil splutters. “That I *adopted*. I found him in the Overworld. *That thing* isn’t even fit to be a pet.”

He points accusingly at the magma slime still trying to wriggle away from Tommy’s boot.

Tommy gives him an offended look. “Don’t talk about Clarence like that!”

“Oh gods, he’s fucking named it,” Wilbur groans.

“*They* are a perfectly acceptable pet,” Tommy sniffs. “Come on, Clarence. We don’t have to deal with this nonsense.”

He lifts his boot to pick up the magma slime again, but Clarence leaps away with surprising speed and squirrels itself into a crack in the nether fortress walls. It’s gone from sight in just a second or two.

“...right,” Phil says. “Look like Clarence doesn’t agree with you either.”

Tommy gives them a mild pout, but concedes to the point.

Well. Time to go kill more not-Clarence magma slimes.

~\*~

When they have 3 large jars filled with magma cream, enough to make several hundred fire resistance potions, they return to wait for Techno in a sitting room of sorts.

Techno shows up a few minutes later, hair near-pristine as always, armor barely scratched. He hands Wilbur the unused fire resistance potion.

“Got the rods loaded into my ender chest,” he says. “You guys?”

“Three jars, stored already,” Phil says. “How many rods?”

Techno grins, and the bared teeth hold just a hint of wildness. “At least 3 thousand.”

Wilbur can’t help but choke out a splutter.

“I know!” Techno says. “This could last us a decade if we keep being as careful as we are now. I’m thinking we sell most of it eventually, though.”

“*How?* ” Tommy asks, eyes wide.

Techno shrugs. “There were around 2 thousand blazes in the barn I was led to. The harvesting system isn’t very good - you just pile dead blaze bodies on top of each other in a long chute and harvest rods at the bottom, which means a lot gets mixed with organs and other dead bits and become unusable. Could have gotten 6 thousand if it was more efficient.”

“No, I mean - how did you kill enough to get 3 thousand rods in 2 hours?” Tommy asks.

Phil is hiding a grin. He knows, then.

Techno taps the hilt of his sword, now sheathed. “Me and Phil figured out how to push the enchantments up to Sharpness 9 a while ago. It’s enough to kill them with one swing, which doesn’t give most of them enough time to fireball back. That means no time spent dodging. You just gotta get used to remaining on the offensive.”

Piglin-based knowledge Techno picked up from his interactions with them, then.

“I bet the operators are pissed, though,” Phil laughs. Techno grins.

“Yep,” he says. “Because I killed every blaze in the barn.”

Tommy bursts into a hysterical, wheezing laughter.

“I know these places aren’t really for-profit, but they just got fucking robbed,” he chokes between giggles.

Techno shrugs easily. “They have two barns, so they can just move some blazes into the empty next and start another colony. Rather big shame for them, though.”

“We should ask to see their glowstone clusters too,” Wilbur muses.

Phil shakes his head. “Once we’re out, I’ll fly to-”

A large shudder interrupts with a roll the fortress walls. Wilbur thinks he hears something creak - and break, loud as lightning.

Techno frowns. “Please don’t be an attack. That would be annoying.”

“Fucking gods,” Phil mutters, expression suddenly souring.

Wilbur winces. Nether fortresses, especially ones under precarious Overworld occupation, are rather prone to being attacked. Usually from other Overworlders looking to secure a vital resource, sent by other cities and nations, and occasionally from piglin factions looking to expand territory.

The woman who had greeted them skids into the waiting room.

“Attack by soldiers from Beastire,” she says, short and clipped, but the wild tangle of panic in her eyes and shaking hands are clear. “Fucking mongrols. If you wanna get out, do it now and do it fast. There’s a back exit down the left hall.”

She glances at Wilbur’s cane, now secured back into its normal, steel-tipped cane form.

An attack from Beastire, huh? He does recall reading about animosity between that city-state and Chester. A bit of a shame, really.

“Let’s go, then,” Phil says.

Wilbur lets out a very undignified yelp when Techno sweeps him into his arms, bridal-style, and begins hurrying towards the exit the woman had pointed towards.

The exit leads into a crimson forest. Wilbur focuses on ducking the vines, his eyelids furrowed tight, while Techno speeds between the trunks of red. Tommy and Phil keep pace behind him.

Their speed depends on how fast Techno can run, because Techno is now the slowest of their group.

Their speed depends on how fast Techno can run with Wilbur huddled in his arms, head against his shoulder.

Wilbur’s not scared he’ll be dropped. He’s not even scared they’ll be caught - even if the attackers give chase, which is unlikely, Techno is still too fast for them to catch up.

With the crimson roots in the netherrack, the structural stability of the ground below is far more secure as well. They're actually relatively safe as long as they keep moving, provided they don't run into any angry hoglins or piglin bandits.

Wilbur doesn't regret coming along. He does wish things don't have to be like this, however.

But he would never be able to live with himself if something had happened to the rest of his family, and he wasn't there.

They stop after a while, towards the edge of the forest. The soul sand valley, Wilbur realizes, is within sight.

"Well," he says when Techno finally lets him down. "So much for relatively safe learning, huh?"

"We got unlucky," Phil says, landing at their side with a whoosh and wave of black. "But we're all fine, right?"

"I'm fine," Tommy confirms, already beside Techno as well.

"So are we," Wilbur says. "Coast clear, too."

He's been doing little except glancing around during the escape. Might as well have made use of it.

"Right," Techno exhales. He turns to the soul sand valley, stretching into the distance. "So. Who wants to shoot some ghosts?"

~\*~

They stay in the soul sand valley for a few hours, hunting ghosts.

Or, they'll say it's "hunting ghosts" when asked. In reality, Tommy and Wilbur play card games while Techno listens and occasionally shoots down a skeleton that wanders too close. Sometimes, he also slams bolts into nearby clusters of glowstone and collects the shards which fall and glitter like lost stardust. They might as well collect everything they might need.

It's Phil who does the actual hunting. Ghosts are soft and squishy creatures, reliant on their flight to stay safe. The only other competition they had in the Nether were blazes - needless to say, once the wild blaze population had started going down, the wild ghost population had exploded. And then declined. And then exploded again.

It is, as Techno would describe, a vicious cycle of semi-balance.

The population is currently at a high point - they'll need several more years to rebound to their previous numbers now. Because in the Nether skies, Phil is a killing machine.

He's armed with only a long dagger, and a fishing rod to pull the creatures closer to the particular spot they've set up temporary camp. He's also several times faster than even the swiftest ghost can react. They stand no chance.

Deflated white masses now litter valley around them, blobby white in a pale imitation of the bone graveyards the soul sand and soil also lay to rest. At some point Tommy has taken a piece of charcoal and drawn smiley faces on a few of the carcasses.

Midway through their time, Techno decides they should begin harvesting. He takes his knife to the white shapes and Tommy follows suit.

Just behind a ghaſt's eyes are ſmooth white ſhapes, ſuſpected to aid ghaſts in flight coordination. Ghaſt tears.

Obviously not actual tears, but naming conventions rarely make ſenſe after time has taken its toll. They cut the two from each corpse before moving on. It's a teſtament to how faſt Phil flies, lures, and hunts ghaſts down that by the time he lands again, a while after the final ghaſt has fallen, they're ſtill not done harvesting. Nearly, but not quite.

In the end, they end up with a few hundred of tears. Not a bad haul, if Techno does ſay ſo himſelf. Even if Wilbur and Tommy both look mildly perturbed by the maſs of white around them - ſome of which are ſtill twitching their tentacles.

~\*~

The portal would be hard to find again for moſt people. Techno and Wilbur, however, both have unuſually ſtrong ſenſes of direction. They route their path with little difficulty.

Treading back through the crimson foreſt is where they face the next ſignificant obſtacle. Like ſome irritating fairytale dictation.

"What do they want?" Tommy aſks.

The band of piglins have their crossbows up. Their ſtance is aggressive. Attack is being withheld, however - the leader is ſaying ſomething.

Around the Novixl-equivalent Nether landmaſſes, the ſtyle of a piglin's gold armor - the ſhape it covers, the patterns carved into the metal - help indicate which nation or tribe or clan or whatever group the wearer might be from, not that Techno's very familiar with what ſtyle is from where in the firſt place.

But. This group does not wear gold. They have iron armor - Overworld iron.

"They're rogues," Techno ſays, becauſe he can infer at leaſt that much. "Baſically the Nether equivalent of lawleſs highway bandits. That armor probably got raided from the dead bodies of Overworlders before us."

Some idiots believe flaſhing gold in the Nether means piglins will not attack. Thoſe idiots have either never been to the Nether, or are dead.

"Well," Phil ſays. He looks diſtinctly unimpreſſed. "I don't recognize this piglin language. Do you?"

"No," Techno ſays. A few words are familiar enough he catches wiſps of their meaning, but beyond a general ſenſe of hoſtility he has little idea either.

Finally, the piglin band - around a dozen of them - ſhifts, and parts to let one of the ſmaller piglins to the front.

"Ah," Techno ſays. "They have a translator."

The piglin in queſtion tilts his head, a ſign of mild ſurprise and affirmation.



“Yes,” he rasps. “We have taken you on your route home.”

He speaks clipped, almost clinically, like he’s holding a tight leash on every word.

“And?” Techno asks.

The piglin’s eyes flicker to his. A flash of realization.

“If you hand over all your valuables, we will spare you,” the piglin says. The others behind him ready their crossbows - most of them, Techno suddenly realizes, at Wilbur.

Fire flares like a volcano in his chest. Techno whips out his sword so fast it sings a note octaves higher than the void above.

Phil and Tommy clearly notice Wilbur’s situation as well. They’re forming a protective wall the next instant. Phil has shed his cloak - it’s not worth hiding his wings in a situation like this.

“How about,” Techno says softly, stance dropping low like a predator about to pounce, “all of you get out of my sight in the next 20 seconds, or I kill every last one of you.”

The translator’s eyes widen. He mumbles something quickly to the leader - who brushes him aside and draws out his own sword. It’s diamond, and shimmering with enchantments.

His heart is speared on *Orphan Obliterator* before he even has a chance to raise it.

Letting go of control on the battlefield is dangerous. A surefire way to get stabbed in an opening and left to die. What matters, what people see when Techno supposedly slips into bloodlust, is the allocation of control - towards his movements, his calculations, to *kill* as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Every piglin becomes a target to leave slumping dead. No survivors - those will take up their daggers and attempt to stab his ankles while down and bleeding out - so if his killing methods are extra gory, it is merely the fastest way to ensure finality. Techno stabs the head, the heart. He beheads, or cleaves the bodies clean in half, *Sharpness 9* cutting like a whip through a water stream.

But the stream is blood, and Techno must spill it all. Each move is a calculation - stab, then stomp and crush, then turn and stab here - that is the most efficient. Leave them as little time as possible to take action. They are not to be considered as whirls of sentience with pleas to be considered, but instead a number, a geometric shape - a situation which he must solve as efficiently as possible.

There is no room for people on the battlefield. Only weapons, and denial, and death.

But the battlefield does not last forever.

“Techno.”

Phil’s voice is clear, clearer than any thought Techno has ever held in his entire life. He trained himself this way - whatever happens, he must always listen to Phil. *His father.*

Not just his father. He owes Phil everything.

“Yes?” Techno responds automatically.

“Drop your sword.”

Techno opens his grip, feels his blade fall. It lands on something wet, squelchy.

He looks down. A mass of red rivets and half-pulped flesh greets his sight. The smell, a distraction and thus something his mind had blocked out, suddenly returns.

The heavy, warm smell of freshly killed bodies. Piglin blood typically doesn't have a metallic tang to it - there is instead the musk of crimson fungus.

"Techno, you okay?"

"I'm fine," Techno says. He takes a small step back, feet landing on another mass of flesh. The movement causes no pain. None of the piglins managed a single hit on him.

There's a few dents in his netherite he'll have to smooth over later, though.

The thought suddenly strikes him, harder than any bolt or arrow.

"Are any of you hurt?" he demands, whipping around.

Tommy blinks. He edges sideways a bit; to reveal Wilbur looking frazzled, but unharmed.

Phil shakes his head.

"We're all fine," he says.

"You don't look like *you* are, though," Tommy says. His expression is calm, but he sounds... *troubled*.

Techno tries to remember if Tommy's ever seen him like this before. Surely he's heard the rumors, the stories, the legends. But-

He's never truly witnessed Techno's supposed bloodlust in action. The Battle of Manberg might count, since he slipped into the mindset a few times - but they were separated for much of the battle and too focused on their own opponents.

Techno had forcibly made sure he wouldn't seriously harm Tommy during the withers. He had stayed beside him, kept watch, built the creatures closer to other targets.

"I'm fine," Techno says, again.

"That was..." Wilbur begins, but he quickly trails off again.

Wilbur hasn't seen much of it either, Techno realizes. It being... whatever he gets up to in the battlefield.

When he's fighting for his life.

"It wasn't ideal," Techno says. He kneels to pick up his sword, wipes the blood on a nearby length of crimson vine, and sheathes it.

"No shit," Tommy says. "You're covered in blood."

Techno glances down.

Huh. That's true. More of his frame is covered in blood than not - blood, and the occasional slice of gut and organ here or there. Blood drips down his limbs, his torso, his cheeks like tears. There's some in his hair too, that he'll have to wash out later.

"Clean up is always annoying," Techno agrees.

"Let's get back home," Phil interrupts before Tommy can ask something else. "We can talk about this later."

Techno would rather they talk about it *never*, but he knows Tommy and Wilbur better than that.

"Right," he says finally. "Though, anyone down to loot these bodies?"

He kicks at a pale, pinkish limb, oozing blood and a yellow-white pus.

From the looks of disgust Tommy and Wilbur shoot him, that's a hard no.

~\*~

Clementine is sitting dutifully by the portal when they return. Her vigil must have been started not too long ago, however, because she still looks as well fed and excited as when they left her. Techno wonders what food supplies she pillaged.

Despite the water they've left out, she begins licking Techno's blood-stained fingers, tail wagging happily, as soon as he comes through the portal and wades through the stream it borders.

Techno's not sure what to make of that. Usually, animals - no matter how tamed or people-friendly - flee from his presence when he's fresh from a battle.

"Weirdo," Tommy says, nudging Clementine away. "Don't drink the blood. Go drink the water in the living room."

Techno blinks, slowly, as Clementine brushes his leg one last time with a bark before bounding away to follow Tommy, clambering up the path they had smoothed from the house to the ravine with a tail wagging hard enough to still dislodge a few stones.

## Chapter End Notes

oooh boy there was a lot of worldbuilding here that i just couldn't bring myself to cut out no matter how i tried

here's some details i did cut out though

- Phil was originally going to remark that there was originally a plan to build a Nether highway to connect Novixl and Pyserne, since sailing across the Novixic and Pysernic Oceans can take a month on good weather. The highway would have cut it travel time down to a week on horseback. It was eventually considered too expensive to justify the worth - which would have involved dumping mass amount of granite and other lava-resistant stone across a huge lava ocean to build a bridge. Technically possible to pull off and have it remain stable enough for regular traffic, but not worth it, because a lot of people would die building the thing, they would

need a lot of building material, and it would only be efficient for smaller groups and personal travel - most ships going between the Overworld oceans are huge trade and merchant ships which transport goods in as much bulk as they can, and it's still much, much cheaper to transports then that way than by land over the Nether of all places, since the cost of feeding and keeping pack animals alive in the Overworld is already big enough, let alone in the Nether where the costs would trip, or quadruple. In the real world, it used to be - and often still is - cheaper to transport goods 1000 miles by ship than 100 miles by land.

## as the circle spins

### Chapter Notes

[discord](#) to get pings for updates/discuss stuff!

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A potion brewing station is assembled in one of the ravine's empty spaces. They now have more than enough glowstone, so the lanterns around them are stuffed to the brim for maximum light.

"This is a small fortune right here," Techno observes. Potions line the walls, each glittering darkly in turn with the flames. A few dozen of the important ones - fire resistance, healing, regeneration, swiftness, invisibility.

As well as weakness and harming. Those are in splash-optimized bottles, and quickly distributed between their ender chest spaces.

"Wonder what shit I could get away with using these," Tommy says, spinning an invisibility potion on his fingertips. Wilbur frowns at him.

"You'd have to take off your clothes first," Phil points out in a futile effort to dissuade him.

"It's the middle of summer."

Techno sighs. "If you get caught, I'm not associated with you at all."

~\*~

"Techno."

"Yeah?"

"Spar with me."

Techno blinks, slowly, as though Tommy had been speaking another language.

"Why?" he eventually asks.

Tommy shrugs.

*Because he feels like it.*

*Because he wants to be prepared.*

*Because he's tired of being afraid.*

*Because he can stay calm, focused, even when Techno is pressing a blade to his neck.*

"Just - in case. 'Cause why not, you know?"

And Techno does know. He nods, and Tommy lets him lead them towards the back yard.

It's been years since he's practiced with Techno, Tommy realizes. Or, almost years. Since the pit fight.

That Wilbur encouraged.

On second thought, the pit fight doesn't count as practice of anything.

The memory sits like an old wound in his chest, scarred. Techno leveling his wooden sword against him doesn't disturb it.

Tommy moves into a defensive stance. Grass swishes cold around his ankles, morning dewed. His lungs are clear, and his mind like summer breeze with a hint of ground clover.

"Ready?" Techno asks. His eyes are searching - hesitant.

Tommy inclines his head.

~\*~

Tommy lasts longer than he expects, for how little he's fought in the past nearly-2 years. He listens and he sees, and somehow he finds the time - or speed - to react in measure.

Maybe it's because Techno hasn't really fought either - Tommy tries to remember when his brother has drawn a blade since they've arrived, and comes up blank.

Sparring lasts half an hour. They knock each other into the grass more times than they bother to count. At the end of it Tommy has a wooden edge pressed against his throat, but Techno is the one with slightly shaking hands. His eyes seem to brush over Tommy's like a mirage, red and thick as blood - just as unseeing.

Something clicks.

"You don't have to do this if you don't want to," Tommy says. He crushes the frost crystalizing in his chest and sits up. The blade against him slides back and falls to the ground just as smoothly, as though its presence was never there.

Techno doesn't meet his eyes.

"You asked to spar," he says. There's a bite to it edging the dry humor he loves so much, but it ultimately sounds more confused than anything else.

"You could have said no," Tommy says. The words are dry on his tongue - bitter, like old medicine. He has choked them down regardless, far later than he should have.

But one of them never has.

"You wanted to," Techno says. Now, he turns to meet Tommy's gaze. His expression is sure.

"You wanted to," he repeats, *too* sure, like it's a lifeline. "That's good enough reason for me."

"Always?" Tommy dares edge. His heart shudders - there is so much power in those words, promises of what Techno would do for him if asked. Tommy would have killed and done much worse to

achieve this love and protection from Techno, once.

It's exhilarating.

It's not healthy.

He can't let it go unchecked. He's learned that much.

"If it's not dangerous for you, then yes," Techno says. "Always."

There's a moment of silence where they sit there, on the grass, Tommy vaguely wondering if this was all a mistake, and also if he should ask for a healing potion because the bruise on his shoulder is throbbing irritatingly.

Then Techno clears his throat and says, abruptly, "you know, we've kinda established this whole 'I'd do anything to protect you and Wilbur and Phil stuff', you know? And that extends to what you request of me. Feels kinda cringe to say 'n shit, but it's like - you know if I can do it, I will.'"

"Why?" Tommy asks.

Techno blinks, looking mildly alarmed.

"Why would I do stuff you want me to do?"

"Why is it cringe?" Tommy clarifies. "To admit it."

"Because it's-" Techno breaks off. His face, over the course of the next few seconds, twists into a reluctant frown.

"I thought you of all people would understand," he says, all further confusion.

"I don't know if you've fucking realized yet-" Tommy snakes forward and throws himself onto Techno, whose back hits the grass with a thump, "-but we've been the world's sappiest shits for like a whole year, and once I would have called that *very cringe*. But - *why?*"

The idea that he would have once refused his family's hugs and reassurances so easily - it terrifies Tommy, actually. He's learning to admit that too. He knows by now their moves of support go both ways.

"You're an adult, I get it," Techno says, looking up at Tommy still half-sitting, half-kneeling on his chest. "Gotten past childhood ideas-"

He cuts off with a grunt when Tommy lightly elbows his stomach.

"First of all, that's like calling yourself a child," Tommy says. "Which, regrettably, you are not."

"Thank you for the wonderful assessment of my character-"

"Second of all," Tommy intones. "I think both of us somehow got it into our heads the dumb idea that admitting you'd do lot of stuff for someone else is a weakness, and you haven't gotten the idea *out* of your head as much as I have."

Attachments, attachments - what was that Techno had said, so long ago, about cutting unnecessary leashes? Of course, Techno considers his family completely necessary, but still a weakness to be

covered. With maybe the exception of Phil.

But there'd been no room for hiding behind shields and denial when Wilbur had been falling, falling, falling. When they both were, in a sense. Acts of clear, unquestioning love had been what saved them. It's what had led Phil to weave a totem into Wilbur's hair.

Techno's shields, Tommy realizes, have been ingrained far deeper than his own. Maybe he understands why a little more now.

"That's - that's a distinct possibility," Techno finally coughs out beneath him. Tommy grins - he's not in denial this time, at least.

"Great!" he chirps. "You know we're not all helpless, not even Wilbur."

"Well, of course--"

"And also, you don't need to worry about being cringe around here," Tommy says. "Honestly. Who decided expressing love of your family is embarrassing?"

Techno scrunches up his face.

"That - that *is* rather unreasonable," he concedes. "Doesn't change how ingrained it is, though."

Tommy shrugs. "Work on it! But also--"

He reaches down to bop Techno's nose with a finger. The motion seems to catch Techno off guard - he sneezes, and then spends several seconds blinking erratically.

"-you don't have to do everything we want," Tommy finishes. "There's such a thing called being equals."

Techno manages to calm down his blinking fit, and frowns. Tommy wonders if it's wrong that he prefers the confused blinking.

"I'm *choosing* to," Techno says, like it's the most obvious thing in the world. "You wanted to spar. Why wouldn't I say no?"

Tommy opens and closes his mouth. And then, he asks, "was it making you uncomfortable?"

He's very sure it was, but he knows better than to lay it out as an assumption.

Techno doesn't look away. He doesn't speak either, though, and that itself says enough.

"I'm sorry." Tommy lets the words leave his mouth quickly, unbidden. "But also, it would be pretty not-cool of you to not tell me why, so we won't have more not-cool moments later."

Techno is silent for a long moment.

"I don't like hurting you," he finally says.

It's Tommy's turn to blink.

"Even if it's pretend," Techno continues, faster, maybe a bit too fast upon seeing Tommy's reaction. "Even if it's just training, and we're taking it easy. It's - it feels weird. Wrong. Really wrong. I shouldn't be pressing a sword at your throat. I shouldn't be pressing anything against your throat."



“Even bandages?” Tommy asks as his first reply, for some reason. Maybe to keep the hysteria locked inside him, somehow. This is a bit more than what he signed up for when he wanted to tell Techno to stop letting his own family unintentionally push him around like a pink doormat - but then, Tommy did start it.

Techno levels his expression into something far too serious. “You know if I had my way, anyone who wants to hurt you would be dead long before they had the chance.”

Tommy laughs, shakily. “Yeah. I’m aware.”

He rolls off Techno’s chest and finds himself lying beside him. Grass and morning dew tickles his cheeks.

“Does it remind you of the pit?” he finds himself asking. “Or, like - Pogtopia in general?”

“Yes,” Techno says, with only a bit of hesitation. “Too much. Feels like I’m back in it, even if you’re so different.”

Well. Tommy’s not quite sure how to take that piece of information, beyond adding to the already long list of fucked up outcomes the entire thing with L’Manberg slapped them with.

One thing at a time, then. Small steps.

“I guess we’ll stay away from sparring in the future,” Tommy says.

“You don’t have to-”

“But you see,” Tommy interrupts, raising a finger towards the sky to waggle. The motion feels so ridiculous he almost lets out another snort. “You see - I *want* to. You know. Because it makes you feel better.”

“...when did you get this mature?”

“Hey!” Tommy shoves Techno again, lightly, and feels something - probably one of Wilbur’s precious ants - crawl over his wrist.

Techno chuckles.

“Alright,” he says. “I see your point. We’ll - do that.”

“And let us know if something’s bothering you,” Tommy adds. “We’ve said this before and we’ll say it again. You’re allowed to let us help you and shit, you know.”

“Yeah.”

Tommy rubs his wrist - the empty one, all pale skin.

The other still has a golden bracelet, wired lines spun like caramel around his veins, humming of magic twisted.

“Is now a weird time to ask you to help me with something? Like - *something*?” Tommy asks before he can question himself any further.

“We’re the world’s leading experts on familial communication, remember?” Techno asks. He pauses. “Yes, gremlin. Of course I’ll help you with your mystery *thing*.”

Tommy laughs, again. He sits up and Techno follows suit.

“Let me get the rest of my flower seeds first,” he says. “Then I’ll show it to you.”

~\*~

“This has been here a while, hasn’t it?”

“Well, I had to plant the moobloom bulbs before they went bad.”

Techno kneels into a patch of clover and cups a soft yellow flower in his hands. It trembles faintly, like a cowering prey animal.

*The wind*, Tommy thinks. *It has to be the wind*.

Techno could not possibly be so terrifying even the flowers fear him. Tommy is here, after all, and he’s not scared.

He feels safer with Techno here, with the others soon to be as well. He trusts they won’t trample on his happiness again.

“So, uh-” Tommy clears his throat. “Was hoping you could help me... plant more flowers. Could have a whole field here.”

There’s around 2 dozen wavy moobloom flowers in this clearing. The gardens around their house are already blooming from last year’s fields, and the seeds spread earlier in spring, but he still has some left over and bought in Risenulf which he figures he might as well plant here.

Techno withdraws his hands from the flower. Tommy set down a bag of seeds and holds out a spade; a second is in his other hand.

There’s no rush, but they’re efficient workers by nature.

Tommy is just planting the last few seeds when a giant bundle of fluff bounds from the surrounding forest like a bloodhound to leap and plant herself on his back like a boulder.

“Clementine.” Tommy winces as she thumps her tail on an already straining section of his spine. “Hello.”

Clementine barks in response.

“Get off him, Clementine,” Phil’s voice calls from above. “You’ll give him a worse back than mine.”

“There’s no way my back will ever be as bad as yours, old man,” Tommy huffs as he pushes Clementine into the grass and stumbles up.

Phil chuckles, but it sounds a little more serious than it should be. Tommy glances around.

“Is Wilbur here? I asked her to get both of you.”

“I’m here.” Wilbur appears from behind a shade of trees, which block view of the path. “Phil went ahead to make sure Clementine didn’t trip and injure herself. She was way too excited about showing

us whatever she wanted to.”

His eyes fall on Techno, and Tommy, and the flowers between them. There’s no trace of surprise in the way his lips then tug up - only a fond sort of realization.

“Did you know about this place?” Tommy asks.

“Clementine show it to me... a while ago,” Wilbur says. “When you were away with Techno and Ranboo.”

“Ah.” Tommy reaches to scratch Clementine’s head. “Well, guess you’re seeing it now too. Techno and I were just planting some more flowers.”

“Are these from the moobloom bulbs Techno bought you on our way here?” Phil asks.

“Yep.” Tommy settles himself into a more comfortable position on the cool grass, eyes focused on the green of leaves above. “I, uh - I come here to relax, sometimes. Get away from stuff when things feel like a bit much.”

Something brushes his shoulder. It’s Wilbur, kneeling down to sit beside Tommy with his cane across his knees.

“Finally found a use for walks, huh?” he says.

Tommy nods.

“’s nice,” he says. The chitter and chirrs of birdsong calls back.

There’s more shifting - and then, Techno and Phil are seated around as well. A circle of them, and just them, just like it has been so many times before.

It’s peaceful. It’s calming.

It feels right.

Tommy thinks he understands Tubbo and his bees a little more now, too.

“You say you come when things get a bit too much?” Techno eventually asks.

“Yeah,” Tommy says. “And - you can come if you want. I don’t own the place or anything, you know?”

“The flowers are yours, though,” Techno says.

“And I’m sharing. Like the kind, brave, amazing soul I am.”

“Of course.” There’s less sarcasm in the reply than Tommy expects.

“So... what’s on your mind, Techno?” Wilbur asks.

Techno shrugs.

Hm. There’s their previous conversation, but Tommy has a feel it goes deeper than that. It almost always does.

“It’s - it’s dumb,” Techno exhales after another few moments beneath Wilbur, Tommy, and Phil’s combined stare.

“That’s what you always insist,” Phil says. “It’s subjective, anyway - and it shouldn’t stop you from working through it.”

Techno plucks a blade of grass and begins worrying it between his fingers. “It’s just - I haven’t stopped thinking about it.”

Tommy thinks about prompting him further, but decides to wait for now. Techno should come to his own admissions if he can.

“About... when we were in the Nether. And I killed all those piglins.”

“That happened, yes,” Tommy says. “I mean, a bit of blood got on my boots, but otherwise I have no complaints.”

Beyond the mild sense of terrifying *huntedness* that had awashed him when Techno turned to face them, but he has a feeling it’s something only more time and familiarity can help with.

Techno’s frown deepens.

“You have complaints,” Wilbur guesses.

“I have apologies,” Phil says, eyes briefly somewhere distant. “But we’ve been over that before.”

“It’s just - it bothers me,” Techno says, voice suddenly small and so unlike the immovable force of being Tommy had always worshipped. “Because that’s what I’m know as. What I am. The Blood God, or whatever other legends people say.”

“If we were only our legends, Techno,” Wilbur murmurs back while taking his hand, “then I’d be dead.”

“I know,” Techno says. “But most of the time it doesn’t feel like it.”

“Oh,” Phil says. His wings encompass them again. “I’m - I’m so sorry. I should never have let it get to that point.”

Techno shakes his head. “We didn’t know - we couldn’t have. We just have to work with it now.”

There’s something missing, something Tommy needs to say. He’s remembered it before, abiding the right moment, but now it’s slipped his grasp like river minnows.

A flash suddenly catches his mind.

“You know, I’m sorry about the whole - the whole blade thing,” Tommy says.

Techno raises his head. Blinks.

“Back during the Pogtopia rebellion,” Tommy says. “You were right about that. I was thinking about how to use you for the rebellion, not about you as a brother. I didn’t think-”

He swallows, but continues. “I didn’t think you needed to be considered like that. Like your feelings would - would matter that much. Because you were always this composed, unstoppable force to me,

and you always acted like your emotions never mattered because you never got caught up in them, and I thought - well. I guess I just took it at face value. I didn't think there was anything deeper going on."

"At least Tommy has the excuse of ignorance," Wilbur says. "It's - understandable. I just couldn't bring myself to care."

"You didn't care about a lot of stuff you should have back then," Techno says. "I won't hold it against you now."

"You should." But Wilbur doesn't look like he'll argue the point further. He just looks tired. "I'm sorry. Again."

"So, um," Tommy mutters. "When you were shouting about the whole - being used thing. Like, you were still a bitch back then, don't get me wrong, but - yeah. You had a point. We just..."

He doesn't want to finish. He doesn't even know what he'll finish that phrase with. But Techno shifts closer and places a hand on Tommy's shoulder regardless.

"I've met a lot of people and heard their opinions on Techno," Phil says in the silence. "They always think he's only what they see. The blood and blade - and nothing else."

Techno clears his throat, a bit too forcibly to be natural. "Yeah, okay - I'm very flattered by this assessment of my incredibly deep hidden depths. Is there any chance we can discuss Clementine's secret character arc now?"

They all turn to Clementine, who's chasing a butterfly a little ways away. She stops to give them cheerful bark when she notices them all staring, before twisting to leap at the fluttering yellow shape again.

"Clementine's great, but let's stay on you," Wilbur says. Techno groans.

"Fine, fine. I will try my best to remember that I'm not just about this whole blood thing, which is pretty easy to do considering I haven't killed anyone besides those piglins since the 16th-"

Techno breaks off, frowning. "Has it really been that long?"

Tommy turns his mind for any memory of Techno killing someone after that horrible, horrible day.

"The merchants on that ship," he says. "I think you killed one or two with your rockets, but I was the one who asked you to attack. Other than that, and the piglins... no."

"Huh," Techno says, sounding almost contemplative. "That's a new record. My death toll per year has been in the thousands since I can remember."

"That's... not really a good thing," Phil says. "It's bad for your mental health."

"Wow, thanks. I feel so reassured."

"Explains why Phil's even weirder than Techno," Tommy snorts.

"Just to be clear, though," Wilbur says. "We're not holding your bloodlust thing against you. Or, at least I'm not."

“I’m not,” Tommy contributes.

“Do I even need to clarify?” Phil asks.

“But I think - and I think you know this too - it’s not healthy, and you’re probably better off staying away from violence for a long fucking time.”

“You think?” Techno snorts. He hunches into himself. “What do you think I’ve been doing?”

“Not just that, though,” Wilbur presses. “You also need to realize you can control... all this. Your future.”

“Well, duh,” Techno says. “It’s a psychological thing. Phil’s checked. No weird curses or magical possession or anything like that - I just started slipping into a mindset of killing indiscriminately because I could and wanted to.”

“The first time I saw it, you were 9,” Phil says flatly. “And also surrounded by people who wanted to kill you. I’m guessing that wasn’t the first time.”

“I - well - listen. You know most Nether hybrids don’t survive to adulthood for one reason or another, right?” Techno asks.

“One of those reasons being the black market for hybrid parts? Racism?” Wilbur asks. “Yes.”

Tommy has a horrible feeling he knows where this is going.

Techno turns to lean his head against Phil’s chest. His eyes glaze, glassy, as though lost in a dream.

“I think I was 5 when I first killed someone,” he says softly. “My mother had abandoned me a month ago. I was alone, and on the streets, and - I got attacked. People like me usually do, especially when we look helpless. I begged. It didn’t matter. He had a knife, but so did I, and in the end I just moved faster.”

He tucks a strand of pink hair behind his ear. Phil holds him closer.

“It was luck that saved me that day,” Techno says. “If a single move had been different, I would have died. Just like that. But I didn’t. And afterwards, I - I cried.”

He looks away. Down. “I think I was crying for hours over the body. I knew what I did - taking an entire life. All that man’s future hopes and dreams, snuffed by me. I could comprehend that. And I hated it. It felt horrible and I never wanted to do it again. I couldn’t even bear to hear the sound of my own voice for a month afterwards.”

“Techno,” Phil whispers. An awful sort of understanding is dawning in his eyes. “How long did it take you to stop crying after killing people?”

Techno bites his bottom lip, sharp teeth grooving back and forth. Tommy can see traces of blood welt the edges. He wants to reach over and stop him, but he doesn’t dare.

“Too long,” Techno says. “I - I tried to get used to it. I told myself I had to survive. But I remember having killed dozens of people, and still crying after each one. I think - I think the first time I didn’t was when I forced myself to stop thinking about what their lives were or could have been. Just - compartmentalize them as numbers. Calculations. Something to cut life functions from. And to be efficient about.”

He looks up again. Tommy doesn't meet his eyes, this time.

"I think it's the efficiency that really did it," he says. "When you're focused on how to kill all your opponents as fast as possible, it - you manage to push the idea of having actually taken a life out of your head. Like - of course I still know, but I stopped myself from considering what was really happening. What I was doing to people."

He laughs shakily. "I think it's all catching up with me now. Since I have the time, and all I do is think these days. I'm been having nightmares about it again, and that hasn't happened since I started forging my whole Blood God reputation."

"That's - you've always been more sensitive about these things than people give you credit for," Phil says. "I don't think about the people I kill like that. But it's not a weakness, Techno. Someone should have been there to help you. Protect you."

Tommy's gaze levels to meet Wilbur's. Neither of them had cried over their first kill.

It had been numb, shocking, a cold lump of dread in his stomach as he had stared into the dead man's eyes, still bloodshot and blown, and in a split second realized how he had just cut apart this stranger and ended an entire line of thoughts, actions, past and future, just like that. And somewhere in the world, people will mourn that ending.

But he had gotten over it quickly enough, as had most of his fellow soldiers. They had to. Yes, that had been another human being, but Tommy is one too, and they were in a fucking war. They had nightmares, sure - but eventually those changed as well, from the dead bodies of others to his own fears.

A rare few other soldiers, however, had never been able to get over the killing. They cried, they begged - they never wanted to see the swords and mud and disease of the battlefield, and most importantly, they couldn't comprehend the idea of destroying another life like war so casually does.

They usually died earlier.

Tommy would never have thought Techno had been one of them.

"I think-" Tommy takes a deep breath. "I mean - we don't have a problem with the act of killing other people, you know? But since it's - eating you up and all - like I said. You don't have to be responsible for everything. Or feel pressured to do what's expected. Or - actually - I'm just gonna stop expecting you do everything I ask you to."

Wilbur furrows his eyebrows, like there's something he's missing. Tommy will have to fill him and Phil on that later.

Techno reaches to pull Wilbur closer by the arm. And then, he glances at Tommy.

Tommy rolls his eyes and scoots until he's pressing against Phil's other side. A wing reaches to encompass him.

"You don't like it though," Tommy says, looking to Techno again. "Killing people. While focused or not."

"No," Techno says. "I think - if I let myself feel it, I still hate it. As much as I did that first time. But it's what I'm supposed to do."

Phil shudders, his feathers like hurricane wind across Tommy's back.

"It's not though," he says, almost desperately. "Your future is what you make of it. You can let the Blood God disappear into true legend. You have the chance. I think you'll be happier."

"Yeah," Techno whispers. He lets the blade of grass, miraculously still straight and vibrantly green, tumble from his fingers. "I - I know. Thanks."

"We're such a mess, aren't we?" Wilbur sighs.

"Cut us some slack, Wilbur," Tommy says. "See those flowers?"

He nods to the field of mooblooms, and other small wildflowers that surround them.

"Yeah?"

"Great. Keep looking at them."

Wilbur and Techno both let out incredulous huffs. But while their gazes wander, they relax as well. Phil begins humming a small tune.

Tommy allows himself a smile.

## Chapter End Notes

i - i just realized the implications of tommy and yellow flowers

guy i fucking swear that was not intentional i came up with the moobloom flowers before passerine was written djljfldkjsfl

also, techno is like - his character fucking fascinates me so much. im not just talking about his dsm5 character, but his character in his videos in general, 'cause like - once in a while you see these glimmers of ridiculously soft kindness and then he just ruthlessly squashes it under his normal sarcastic, bloodthirsty persona again and i will stand by the idea that techno is naturally a very kind, sensitive person who grew up under circumstances that just slowly crushed it all out of him until you're left with this mask of a person, but occasionally that side of him still peaks through like when he was housing tommy and hiding him from dream, and with his animals, and ofc his whole relationship with phil

environments shape people, guys. it shapes people more than anything else.

i reply to comments live! [twitch](#)

[tumblr](#) and [twitter](#) for questions and art!



# on the hills of war and wonder

## Chapter Notes

[discord](#) to get pings for updates/discuss stuff!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“You like them?”

“Well, yeah,” Tommy says. He runs a finger down the paper, snagging lightly on every uneven cut where paper meets empty space. More authentic than a clean slice, supposedly.

It’s a snowflake, one of several Techno has folded, cut, and hung around the room, along with the origami Tommy originally requested.

There’s nowhere near as much as what Techno had hung in his and Wilbur’s room, and they’re lifted much higher - Tommy doesn’t feel like smacking into paper every time he walks, and neither does Phil - but it does seem as though some of that same magic has been woven through the air as well.

“Glad you like it,” Techno says. He still sounds a bit awkward - for as much gift giving he does, he really is terrible as accepting thanks.

Tommy pulls him into another hug. He doesn’t care that the amount of contact they have seems almost excessive now, or that he used to find it uncomfortable around Techno, but no longer. There’s more important things, and anyone who complains about personal dignity can go fuck themselves.

~\*~

*Entry... I’ve actually lost track. Huh. And I am certainly too lazy to flip back and check.*

*When I awoke this morning, there was a bird on our outer windowsill. A cardinal - this puffy little red thing with a black chin. It’s not uncommon for birds to be there, since we have a windowsill garden and Tommy’s planted these cute little orchids and a sweet berry bush. They look really nice together.*

*Techno says the orchids are parasites have been feeding on the sweet berry bush for energy, and that’s what’s keeping the bush small enough to be contained by a small wood box. Techno is a killjoy. For some reason, Tommy actually fucking agreed with him. Tommy is also a killjoy.*

*Anyway - cardinal!*

*Its wing was broken and it looked like it had been taking shelter under the bush. I think it must have smacked into the window - we usually have the curtains down to prevent this sort of thing, but I guess we forgot to unloose them last night.*

*Techno had this hilarious look of concern when we found it huddling and chirping pathetically this morning. He set the wing right himself - the ease with which he did it makes me wonder if he’s had to*

*do so on, say, larger instances before - and he set up this little cage with food and water. Looked like he was taking care of one of his precious potato plants.*

*I've forgotten how much he adores cute animals, with all the murder he does of them. It does feel strange that he shoots down rabbits and small deer without hesitation, but acts so soft for the ones that aren't destined to end up on our dinner plates. Then again, I think we've all learned that Techno has been shoving contradictions down his own throat his entire life.*

*The cardinal's mostly fine now. It's calmed down a fair bit, which is good, because it was making a small racket earlier and that made Clementine all jumpy.*

*Oh, and Ranboo came by yesterday. He looks fine. Normal. Not sure why I noted that, actually, since he comes by a lot. Even if he hates climbing up the mountain - apparently, he could just theoretically teleport a few times to get here, but he doesn't trust himself not to land somewhere that will lead to him slipping off or the ground giving way, so he saves it for when the locations he might end up at aren't potentially lethal.*

*Meanwhile, Phil really likes the origami Techno put up in Tommy's room. Tommy's also been begging Techno to teach him how to make those snowflakes. I believe I will need to ask Scott to custom order some more origami paper.*

~\*~

*Yet Another Journal Musing By Technoblade*

*I feel fine. Normal.*

*The sky is blue. The grass is greener. There's white swirls in each - clouds and mourner's flowers.*

*The chickens discovered a newfound taste for those flowers today.*

~\*~

“You ever think about what New L’Manberg’s Cabinet is doing right now?” Tommy asks. His eyes dip out of sight, behind Techno’s back, as *The Camarvan* rocks to another wave.

“Not too often,” Phil says. “Sometimes it crosses my mind, but I don’t really dwell on it. Why?”

Is Tubbo’s newest letter particularly concerning?

Tommy tosses another piece of chewy red candy into his mouth. “Just - felt like asking.”

“Nothing revolutionary has happened in New L’Manberg recently,” Wilbur says. “And even the most efficient governments take time to sort out policy.”

“Especially foreign policy,” Techno adds. “Which is what has been dominating news about New L’Manberg since its reconception.”

Phil sees the moment it strikes him, eyes suddenly furrowing, a mirror to Phil’s own thunderbolt of realization.

“It’s Dream, isn’t it?” Wilbur asks. “Like - Dream personally.”

“Yeah,” Tommy says. He knocks a knuckle on the empty space beside him, the wood thuds almost muffled in the warm sea air. A moment later, Clementine bounds from her position at *The Camarvan*’s helm to snuggle herself into his lap. She really is full grown now, and big enough to drape completely over Tommy’s outstretched legs and torso. She’s also surprisingly excited about being at sea - Phil supposes an area like this would breed dogs more amiable to the water.

Tommy’s hand scratch her head once, twice - and then lingers there, as though looking for some anchor to ground him in the ocean. Clementine licks his cheek eagerly.

Phil shares a glance with Techno. They’ve both kept up with what news makes its way over here, and it’s enough to paint a picture.

“There’s no way Dream will be able to convince his generals or provincial rulers to attack New L’Manberg, even if he wants to,” Phil says. “Tubbo’s administration have played their cards really well.”

“Yeah, but it doesn’t stop assassins or - or independent missions,” Tommy says. He glances away. “It’s just - Tubbo says he’s been getting a bit more insistent on finding me again. And he’s being a lot more subtle about it too - keeping the search down to a low profile. Tubbo got several tips from people who said they’ve seen Dream personally chasing down leads.”

His voice drops, lower. “Actually, Tubbo thinks he’s been as insistent about finding me the whole time. It’s just that New L’Manberg’s territory gains had been keeping him busy for a while, but now that negotiations for final borders are mostly over he’s got more time to listen to other stuff.”

“I’m guessing he wants to draw territory negotiations out and keep Dream busy,” Wilbur says. Tommy nods.

“He *wants* to. But he wants to keep New L’Manberg safe more. So once I step foot back in New L’Manberg, if Dream manages to drag me back to his lair or whatever - we don’t know what Tubbo can justifiably use as leverage. It won’t be much. I’m not even a citizen anymore.”

“What about...” Phil takes another breath to untangle the idea further. “What about motive?”

Wilbur freezes. Tommy’s hand stops its stroke down Clementine’s back, to which she responds with a soft whine.

“Motive?” Wilbur asks. His tone is careful. Just a hint *afraid*.

He has his suspicions too, Phil knows. By this point, all of them do.

“Well, *why* does Dream want Tommy back so much?” Phil asks. “Clearly, he doesn’t have that obsession with Tubbo or Fundy, who were both founding fathers and revolutionists as well. Isn’t it strange he’s so obsessed with Tommy?”

“I’m just that special,” Tommy snorts. But then he sighs, all the mirth flowing out. “Yeah, it is kinda weird. I’ve thought about it, but how the fuck am I supposed to understand that bitch’s mind?”

“If you know the enemy and know yourself, you-”

“-need not fear the result of a thousand battles,” Tommy finishes. “Yeah, I know. Problem is, I *don’t* know Dream and that’s not exactly something I can change.”

“It has to be a trait only you have,” Phil muses.

His previous suspicions arise again. But now's not the time to bring them up, not when it's still speculation upon speculation.

Tommy looks from him to Wilbur, and then to Techno, and shrugs.

"No fucking clue," he says.

"Now that I think about it, a lot of stuff Dream's done with you is weird," Wilbur says. "You know, like letting the fate of a wealthy province hang on a duel between him and some child."

"And letting it be exchanged for 2 discs," Techno adds. "I mean, honor battles have happened before, but for stakes as high as that? Doubtful. Not exactly the pinnacle of proper prioritization there."

Wilbur chuckles. "Oh, you should have seen some of the letters we intercepted from his nobles. A lot of them were absolutely furious, even if they worded it subtly. I suspect that's why part of why current negotiations with New L'Manberg have been going so long - he's probably facing a lot of resistance and scrutiny from people wanting to make sure he doesn't do something as stupid as that again."

Phil has met many in extreme power who've made very, very questionable choices. Kings and queens who should be in mental hospitals, generals so crazed death lingers constantly in their shadow. The Dreams have always been known to be eccentric in certain aspects, and each is notably different from the last, but generally they have made reasonable decisions regarding the fate of the SMP - and the current one hadn't made himself much of an exception until Tommy apparently came into the picture.

Then again, people change. Minds warp and deteriorate.

And immortals are not immune.

"We'll be with you, though," Phil says. That, at least, he can promise.

"I've beat Dream before," Techno says. "I can do it again."

"We all can." Phil glances at Wilbur, who nods back. There is more than one way to be dangerous. "We'll keep you safe, or die trying."

"Please don't die," Tommy mutters. "I'd rather be locked up in Dream's dungeon and know you're all still alive than - than any situation where you're dead."

Wilbur pulls Tommy's head onto his lap, legs crossed.

"We'll try our best," he says. A wave crashes against their deck, and in a sweeping moment swamps his hand in cold seawater. Something is left fluttering between his fingers when the water recedes - Phil peers further to see a piece of pale white kelp.

There's not much they can promise, truly. But what little they can be guaranteed of has to be enough.

It has to be. Phil has come too close to losing his sons. He will not allow this second chance to slip away.

~\*~

"Tubbo thinks I should get an emotional support dog too," Ranboo says.

“Will you?” Tommy asks.

“Hm. Maybe. One day.”

~\*~

“I think I just need to do one more revision,” Techno says, nodding towards the now giant volume on the table. At some point, Phil knows, he had stitched 3 separate journals together to create the thing. And it’s only the 5th of its kind.

“And then you’ll head for Beastire?” he asks.

Techno nods again. “I should be back within-”

“I want to go with you,” Wilbur says. Tommy stalks over to plop himself beside him on the couch.

“Count me in too,” he says.

Phil opens his mouth, but Techno sees and shakes his head.

“Someone should hold down fort here,” he says. “The three of us will be enough.”

There’s a separate plea in the request - *let us prove we can handle ourselves*.

The last time Phil left his sons alone, to pursue their ambitions without oversight - well. That’s why they’re here in the first place.

But they’re adults, and they should make their own decisions. Shouldn’t they? Even if they’re nowhere near as matured as they really could be, or will be? They define themselves as adults and their own beings, including Tommy now.

The argument is circular - or circular enough that it drives Phil’s head like a leaking wheel, half-crazed when he tries to think about it.

“Yeah, we promise we’ll do our best to not die,” Wilbur says. He might have said *don’t worry*, once, but they all know it can’t be helped. Especially not after everything.

“Well then, you three have fun,” Phil responds. Because in the end, it’s not really his choice to make.

“It’s okay,” Tommy says. He snuggles closer to Wilbur, hands grasping, but his eyes are leveled and strangely dark in the lantern light. “We’ll - we’re big men. Not gonna do any stupid shit.”

Phil laughs, albeit weakly. Of course Tommy understands.

“I know,” he says, and lets a smile tug his face. They really have grown, so much. “You guys can handle yourselves. Just stay together, alright?”

“Right,” Tommy says, nodding.

“You guys talk like we’re on the docks already,” Techno snorts. “It’ll still be at least another 2 or 3 weeks. Late August, probably.”

Phil resolves to mentally prepare himself *later*, instead of worrying on it so much now. Things should be fine.

~\*~

*...and it would be pretty funny, if there isn't an actual chance of them convincing enough people. And like, I get it - if New L'Manberg is your country's name then having the capital city be called "L'Manberg" isn't exactly creative or - I guess, "nice sounding" thing. But like, everyone already knows it as such. Its official name is even "City of L'Manberg" for more distinction. Why change it, you know?*

*On the other hand, while these people want to change the City of L'Manberg's name, there are still others who want to change New L'Manberg's name back to Manberg. Quackity actually thinks we should consider it - he says it'll build more national unity.*

*He's a native to this place like Schlatt was, so I guess it makes sense. To him. Wilbur changing this region's name from Manberg to L'Manberg was a lot more unpopular than I realized at the time.*

*If only that's the most troublesome thing Quackity opposes me on. But no, he's also back at it again insisting we negotiate Physere as part of our territorial gains.*

*Like, he has to know there's no fucking way the SMP will ever give up that place up, unless we give back Secare. He's even talking about a military annexation! The nerve!*

*I fucking swear, I almost broke my streak and drank again when Quackity talked for 3 fucking hours to the Parliament about how getting Physere will give us so many raw materials and boost our shipbuilding and carpentry industries and create a ton of jobs and supply a growing military, and there were idiots nodding along with him. As if we could just traipse through the place, say "hey, this is ours now," and the SMP will suddenly roll over and just accept that.*

*They were THIS close to invading us again when we annexed Secare. I'll like to see Quackity with his stupid smug smirk when his precious economy and military is fucking pounded into dust as Dream marches his forces over to engage us in another war. As if the Sparklez Kingdom and Hypixel can protect us when he launches dynamite everywhere again and completely destroy our crop harvests, or unleashes more withers, since that'll be what "convinces" us to give Physere up.*

*Fundy's been running between the two of us trying to come up with a compromise. When he's supposed to be supporting only me. He's my vice and Quackity's just a Cabinet member - not even one I wanted in the first place, since he's a fucking traitor who pillared Schlatt's presidency - but apparently we can't get anything done when we're both so dead set on this.*

*I think I should just fucking kick Quackity out of the Cabinet. I've been trying to pass legislation on literally anything else for the past two weeks, but no, Quackity and his coalition just keeps blocking me insisting that annexing Physere will be the magical solution to all our problems.*

*Fundy and Niki and everyone else keeps telling me to stop hardblocking everything Quackity says so much. It's all "he has some points" and "he's our link to the native New L'Manbergians" and "Schlatt won popular vote for a reason and most of the people who supported his policies are still in office" and other such bullshit. Sometimes I wish I could just fire all the former Schlatt and now Quackity supporters, but no. That would just lead to another uprising, and according to Niki my chances of surviving that one wouldn't be great.*

*It means we'll have to work out a compromise eventually. I don't want to admit it, but it doesn't matter. They'll find a way to bring it up with the SMP during our next negotiation with them, even if we're running out of time to be squabbling over something like that and the SMP will not budge on losing more important territory to us.*

*The peace treaty signature date is scheduled to be on November 16, and ideally we want to have the significance of that symbolism on our side. The 16th day of a month has become something of a mythical, superstitious day around here. It's a day where things will happen - maybe great, maybe terrible, but always something monumental. Of course, that sort of mindset will be a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy, but we'd much rather having the signing day on the 16th any any other day regardless.*

*Dream is supposed to be at the next meeting himself. Maybe he'll slap some sense into those idiots - I doubt his nobles and merchants will let him fight another bow duel to determine the fate of a territory, so if something goes wrong blame falls on his shoulders, not King Eret's. He's under pressure too.*

*Can't believe the day has come where I actually root for Dream to succeed at something.*

*I miss Ranboo. He was only around for a few short months, but I miss still him. It's unfair, I know.*

*I would switch to talk about some more uplifting news for you, but I can't think of any. Which is just depressing. I'll say the least infuriating thing I've had to deal with in the past few weeks - it's these collection of cliffside caves. New L'Manberg's ocean border has expanded since I took office and in one of those expansions our coastline stretched to include not just beach shorelines, but also some cliff borders with the water. There's a lot of caves in these cliffs, some of which are below sea level and flooded, and some of which are not. They're only a few dozen leagues from the City of L'Manberg, actually - it's not too far.*

*Anyway, there's villages and people who have lived in these caves for at least several centuries. They've been really independent and mostly just doing their own thing during that time. I finally took a visit there to have some diplomatic talks with their leaders, and basically we just affirmed that they can keep their own local leadership as long as they acknowledge they're part of New L'Manberg and pay their taxes, which was basically the system they had beforehand with Schlatt, Wilbur, and the SMP anyway. They've got this neat trade network going, actually - I'm thinking once we have the time and resources, those caves would make a really good post for conducting more trade connections.*

*The caves and villages themselves were really cool. They had some really neat crystals and gemstone structures naturally growing in places, and these wacky types of fish that apparently only live in the pools and rivers in those caves. Plus, the view of the ocean is super cool from the inside, even if my guards nearly had heart attacks over me potentially falling into the ocean.*

*Really nice, peaceful atmosphere. I think I'll ask for a vacation home here, even if I might never have a chance to use it until the end of my presidency, assuming I even survive. Maybe it'll be like a motivation, or promise - I bought this vacation home for when I leave office because I expect to leave office alive. Even if I really don't. It's like - a weird little reassurance thing, to give me a bit of peace of mind. I at least deserve it, don't I?*

*~\*~*

*...and Techno says that's why you solve problems by just killing everyone. He was joking though. I would know. He was very much joking.*

*Anyway, then he turned and offered some actual advice. It sounds pretty good to me, though we're working on the limited information we do know about everything, so... yeah.*

*He says first and foremost that two things define the procedure for passing legislation - precedent, and current legislation. New L'Manberg's Constitution is a bit of a mess, last I heard, and the rules for how laws are passed were always rather vague when Wilbur was in office. Neither him or Schlatt*

were president long enough to flesh it out. Meanwhile, precedent is usually determined in application by the judicial system.

Basically, make sure the judges are on your side. We didn't really have a high court or national court or supreme court - whatever you want to call it. That was left to individual towns and districts. As far as I know, you don't have a national court system yet. Techno says to consider appointing one, and making sure the way judges are appointed is something you can control. Of course, it can't be too overpowered, since you're also on about this whole democracy and stable nation thing.

Next, from what I've gathered, while generally it's a  $\frac{3}{5}$  majority to pass legislation among the Parliament, the ideas about term limits and who gets to be in the legislation/parliament and who even counts is... kinda spotty? Like some are appointed and some are elected from local provinces and some are just there because they or their family were in power before the revolution and somehow managed to cling onto it. After the peace treaty with the Dream SMP is finalized, you should probably consider hashing out the proper rules. Techno says New L'Manberg's government is a complete organizational mess right now that everyone is avoiding actually establishing clearly, instead just patching up with new weirdly specific rules here or there, and I kinda agree.

Quackity - you can't fire him, or conveniently assassinate him. Well, I guess you could, but it wouldn't end well for you. Techno says there should be some smaller names on his side you could quietly replace with supporters of yours. He also says to be very careful about how you handle Quackity too, though - you guys are disagreeing over certain fundamental policies, but you might agree on others in the future, and you're all supposed to be working towards bettering New L'Manberg. Point is, there is no point antagonizing him unnecessarily when you'll have to keep running the country together in the future.

From what you've written, even you can admit he wants what's best for New L'Manberg. He's invested like you. You can't just discount that.

Also, here's a little something from me - Sanctuary doesn't get massive amounts of news, but we get enough merchants looking to trade gold and iron that we do get a fair bit, and the newsbearers have looser lips around here. From what I can gather, Dream's power in the SMP is waning, while the king's is growing.

It is kinda weird, how that works. I have no fucking clue why somewhere along the way the a Dream decided to start appointing kings and queens to act as their mouthpieces while everyone knows the Dream holds the actual real power. But it might prove to be a downfall - Eret's been king again for a while after that brief stint with George, and I think he's more receptive towards cooperation than Dream will be.

He's also, apparently, gaining more favor with the upper classes of the SMP. Especially the upper merchant classes - though there's not much of a difference these days. Call it a hunch, but it might be worth getting in touch with him some time.

One more thing - Wilbur had something to add about your predicament as well. He says to watch your perceptions - if you're set on slowly creating a more democratic system, then go ahead. But the citizens will use it against you if you're not careful, and you might find yourself and all your allies voted out of power.

So, take credit for accomplishments. Spin your public image and that of your allies' further. Make sure to write in laws that protect voting security, and clearly define what is legal and what isn't, and what to do when there is uncertainties over ballots.



*And arrange the election for when you know public support for you is high, or support for your favored candidate is high.*

*I guess Wilbur would know. He did say, "don't make the same mistakes I did."*

*He's hung up his politician days. But yours are just beginning, Tubbo. I hope you don't regret it.*

## Chapter End Notes

friendly reminder that the unreliable narrator tag applies to everyone, and that includes Tubbo :D

i reply to comments live! [twitch](#)

[tumblr](#) and [twitter](#) for questions and art!

## and we've all broken more

### Chapter Notes

[discord](#) to get pings for updates/discuss stuff!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“But do we really need to pack *all* our Notch apples?” Wilbur asks.

“You’re keeping at least one,” Techno adds at the same time.

Phil glances between them, at their expressions resolute, and then at the way Tommy lurks behind Techno with a warning glare.

Sighing, he sweeps one of the shimmering apples off the table and into his ender chest.

“Divide the rest between you three,” he says, forcing firmness into his voice. “I’ll be fine with one apple.”

Techno rolls his eyes, but splits the remaining ones into his ender chest and that of his brothers’.

“I think recently, we’ve gotten into a bit of a self-martyring situation,” Phil mutters. “I don’t remember any of you so willing to throw away safety before.”

“You think this is a *recent* development?” Tommy asks, raising his eyebrow.

“Recent by my standards,” Phil corrects. Fuck, remembering that is still hard sometimes. “Not by yours, I know. Sorry.”

Wilbur snorts. “*Self-martyring situation*. What gave that away?”

Phil meets Techno’s eyes - and the pressure mounts, until it feels too high-

But he doesn’t look away.

“You know we choose to owe each other what we do,” Techno says quietly. “We’re all adults, but we’re also all family.”

“It’s a strange paradox, when you think about it,” Wilbur says, leaning back into his seat. “How and to what extent are we responsible for each other?”

Tommy glances between all three of them, and moves to plop himself against Wilbur on the couch.

“This shit again,” he mumbles.

Phil laughs weakly. “Yeah. This shit again.”

Techno clears his throat. “I’ll just say this here - I love you all very, very much, and I don’t care if certain people think it’s cringe to say that. So, I do whatever I can to help all of you.”

“Unless it’s something small and makes you uncomfortable,” Tommy adds. “Don’t be such a doormat, Techno - we have Wilbur for that.”

Wilbur makes an indignant noise, but wraps his arm around Tommy.

“Agreed,” Techno says. Then, he pauses. “Well, Wilbur shouldn’t be a doormat either.”

“Whatever I agree to do is by choice,” Wilbur mumbles.

“I sure hope it is,” Phil frowns. “Wilbur, you know - well, I hope all of you know you don’t owe me or anyone else anything.”

“But we choose to stick together and be a family,” Tommy says. “That means a fucking lot, Phil.”

“It does.” Phil finally looks down, after Techno has done the same.

When he had invited - just straight up added, really - Tommy into the family, he had been so young and bright-eyed and determined to spite a world that seemed to hate him.

It took only a year for Tommy to start calling him “dad.” It took only another for him to drop that title - though not without traces.

“It means Techno’s gonna keep chasing thieves for me too, isn’t it?” Tommy suddenly asks.

“Chase thieves?”

“When we were in Risenulf. Someone snatched Tommy’s satchel, and I chased him down,” Techno says. He takes a sip of tea from his mug, and makes a face - probably at its lukewarm temperature. Phil stifles a chuckle - that’s what he gets for spending so much time writing in his book instead of paying attention to the beverage he made.

“I think I had a mini-crisis about whether I should have been the one doing it, since I’m an adult now.” Tommy frowns.

Techno, meanwhile, jerks his head up. The stare he directs is as if Tommy’s just revealed himself to be the thief all along.

“But-” he swallows. “I had a mini-crisis about whether I should stop infringing on your independence to handle your own problems. That’s - it doesn’t get much more juxtaposed than that.”

Wilbur abruptly cackles, loudly. “Well. You two just described the same fucking thing.”

“Oh shut up,” Tommy growls, giving him a low glare. “I’d like to hear you resolve the issue.”

Wilbur waves a hand. “Like I said, it’s a strange paradox. Techno going after the thief brushed Tommy’s autonomy to make decisions about his own problems, but as family Techno has resolved to help Tommy however he can and so far we’ve agreed that’s a good thing.”

“You guys act like you’re debating ancient philosophical conundrums,” Phil says, raising an eyebrow. “It was a fucking lost satchel.”

“In the same way the ship of Theseus is just a ship?” Techno asks mildly. Tommy flips him a finger.

Phil settles for a glare, though when directed at Techno he can never bring any heat into them.

Though, there's obviously more - more he thinks they're missing, actually. For once, Tommy's not the one doing the detective work.

"Point is," Wilbur says. "Tommy, do you mind Techno doing it? Chasing down thieves and - other things of that nature?"

Tommy shrugs. "No? I know he's faster than me. I just - didn't want him to feel like he has to. Since I'm supposed to be responsible for myself now."

"I don't mind." Techno leans towards him, as though to be reassuring. "I'm happy to, in fact."

"I think..." Phil hesitates, but all his children are looking at him now. He sighs, but plows on. It has to be said. "I think we're gotten the idea of what it means to be an adult a little backwards."

There's a pause. Clementine, who Phil has forgotten is asleep at his feet, flails her haunches a bit as though in the middle of a dream hunt.

"Please explain," Techno says.

Oh, great.

"This is from the perspective of someone who is, admittedly, very old," Phil begins. He would still be considered young by Endavian standards, but whatever. "But anyway. People think of adulthood as being like... you reach an age - 18 - and suddenly you're responsible for yourself."

He thinks. Admittedly, he doesn't pay much attention to this area of culture, and human societies are so fickle anyways.

"The age and specifics change with different cultures," Wilbur notes. "But yeah, generally. That's how it works in the New L'Manberg area, and a lot of other places we've lived in."

"But 18 is an age number," Phil presses. "What separates 17 year old Tommy from 18 year old Tommy?"

Tommy blinks. "I'm older?"

"But what about 18 to 19 year olds?" Phil asks. "Why isn't the age cap 19? Or 17? Or anything else? 18 is an average, but everyone's different - people act like once you reach a certain age, you're an adult and the maturity is supposed to follow it. At least, that's what it seems like from what you and Techno have said."

It's not true, though. Tommy is no more or less qualified to do "adulthood" the day before he turned 18 than the day afterwards.

"So - what you're saying is that a specific age doesn't equal maturity?" Wilbur asks. "But people have to use an age to just mark it. You can't stay a child forever, and you have to expect people to grow up sometime."

"It works - somewhat - for the wider society," Phil says. "But here, I'm saying that people develop into maturity over time, in different ways and at different paces, and they never really stop developing. It changes with everyone. When did Tommy begin making and acting on choices adults should be making?"

Wilbur pales, slightly. Techno brings his hands together in a half-clasp.

“The war where I killed a bunch of people probably counts,” Tommy shrugs. Techno winces, at that. “Or that one time I abandoned the country I helped found to run away with you guys.”

Phil’s heart sinks.

“Yeah, that,” he finishes, feeling far lamer. But he refuses to give this progress up. “I think Tommy had been acting as an adult far before his 18th birthday, and nothing really changed when that day passed. It’s still a gradual climb towards - you know. Getting better.”

“So the moral of the story is that time is fake and age is just a number?” Techno asks, clearly hiding a snort beneath his following cough.

Tommy rolls his eyes. “Of course you’d say that so we can’t call you old anymore.”

“I’m serious!” Phil protests. “Like - Tommy, Techno - neither of you mind Techno helping with stuff like chasing down a thief. Or other things. And Tommy doesn’t have an issue with helping Techno either. So - you know. Keep doing it. And the whole responsibility thing - if both of you two have agreed to it, then both of you have taken the responsibility to work out the agreement, and so what happens afterwards, haven’t you?”

Techno takes another sip from his mug of cold tea.

“That’s - yeah,” Tommy says. “That sounds about right. Uh - yeah.”

“Thanks, old man,” Techno says. “That extends to you, doesn’t it?”

Phil blinks.

Oh. Right. It does.

“If we’ve agreed to it beforehand, or work it out afterwards, we’ve all taken responsibility for what’s occurred?”

Phil nods to Wilbur’s question of clarification.

“Well - you know, by that idea we could all be children or adults,” Techno says. “If the age is so subjective.”

Phil laughs, though it’s a weak sound. A familiar pang wrings his chest. “I treated you all like adults when you were children. I’m not going to treat you all like children now because you’ve been forced to grow up too early. You guys can - should - determine what you want, and I’ll be there if you need me.”

Wilbur turns to nest his head against Phil’s chest. Phil finds his fingers combing through his hair a moment later.

“And we agree to help each other?” Tommy asks. “Protect each other? Whatever the fuck we’ve already been doing?”

“Yeah,” Phil says. “Excluding certain times when we *can’t*. Like with a certain upcoming trip.”

“I’m sorry-”

“No, I’m - I’m not upset about it. I understand why.”

He does. Phil thinks he does. Techno, Wilbur, and Tommy all have their own lives and wants, as interconnected as they all are, and brothers deserve chances to be together without a parent's hovering.

They want him around - but for him to be always lurking, overwatching, does get old.

They have the right to have some time alone, and sometimes there's nothing much else to it than that. Phil has decided to not overthink it, and he hopes it's for the best.

He frowns, and adds, "don't feel like you have to get family authorization on everything, though. The point of autonomy is that you have a right to pursue your own desires above what other people want."

"Duly noted," Techno says. "But I think I'm not quite prepared for than much just yet, Phil."

"We know," Tommy says. "We'll - it's fine, you know? We got a good thing going right now."

"We do," Phil agrees.

"If anything bad happens... like, any time, there will still be a ton of guilt to pass around," Wilbur mutters into Phil's shirt.

"But at least we know we agreed," Tommy says. "We can't expect to *never* get hurt. We'll just have to deal with the fact that everyone tried their best, or agreed beforehand to... not be there, I guess. The important thing is that we know why someone wasn't able to be there, right? Like how Phil's not going with us to Beastire?"

"Yeah," Phil says. "We'll have to come to terms with the fact that we're all extra careful about this now, because of... what's happened. Since some of us still have a lot of blame from it."

A hand presses into his wing. Phil turns. It's Wilbur, staring into him with his mouth pressed thin.

"*I'm* sorry," he says, pressing closer. "It was my fault as much as it was yours."

Phil wants to look away, but he forces himself still. They've taken a different turn now - Wilbur's eyes are murky with memories. Of a revolution twice over. Of betrayals even deeper.

"You were young," he says. "And I hadn't taught you what I should have. I didn't know how to, but that doesn't change what happened."

Tommy clears his throat. "Uh - mistakes were made, yes. Wilbur was probably still a child in terms of maturity back then, though-

"That hurts, but I'm not gonna protest-

"-but it's all over now," he continues. "I've forgiven you all, so can we stop beating ourselves over it? Not gonna lie, it gets depressing after a while."

"When has it not been depressing?" Techno retorts, at the same time Phil and Wilbur ask "you've forgiven us?"

Since - since when? Has it passed unseen like Wilbur's admission?

Tommy looks just as surprised as them.

“I - uh.” He frowns.

“If you haven’t and you just slipped,” Wilbur adds hastily, “that’s - that’s fine-”

“No, I’m - mostly over it,” Tommy says. “Like, I don’t know if I’m *fully* over it or what that even means, really, but I’ve stopped resenting any of you for what happened.”

“Oh,” Phil says. He tries to add more, but nothing comes to mind.

“It’s - I’m fine with it being talked about and I don’t - it’s this weird twisty feeling deep down that I used to get when I think of you guys and what you did and - it’s slowly disappeared. I don’t know, but I feel fine and happy around you all, without any strings attached, so I think that means I’ve forgiven you.” Tommy takes a deep breath.

Wilbur and Techno exchange uncertain glances.

Forgiveness is such a tricky subject, because - what defines it? Tommy has been content living with them without fear or retaliation for a while. They’ve worked to make it that way. But does that mean he’s forgiven them? Does forgiveness mean he’s willing to look past their past actions? He’s no longer tormented because of them? But no, he still has the nightmares-

Phil’s never needed someone else’s forgiveness before. He had thought Tommy would never forgive him - had thought he would need to settle for being present and supportive and trying to understand for a long time, and maybe one day Tommy would love him in a way that somewhat resembles how he used to.

He hadn’t expected to get this far.

“You think you’ve forgiven us?” Wilbur asks, voice soft.

Tommy fidgets in his seat - Phil is about to reassure him they don’t have to talk about it, but then he opens his mouth again.

“So - I mean, I’m going to pull a Techno here and just say I love you all, okay?” he begins. “We’re a family. Maybe we weren’t for a while, but we are now. I’m sure of that.”

“Um,” Techno says. “Thanks.”

Tommy rolls his eyes. “And I have the memories of being angry at you guys. For - you know, first of all, not being there. Maiming Tubbo. Convincing me to fight in a war, blowing up L’Manberg, and being a manipulative dick in Pogtopia-” he raises an eyebrow at Wilbur, who simply nods back. “Like - I know I should be angry, and I was before. Just - I can’t be angry forever. And I don’t think I am anymore. I don’t know if it’s because you guys are better now, or just time, or both.”

“They say time heals all wounds,” Techno murmurs. “I mean - I wouldn’t say it heals them all. But wounds change and - you get used to it eventually. I think.”

“I know some people who can hold onto anger forever,” Phil says. “But Tommy, I don’t - you’re not one of them.”

“I’m not,” Tommy agrees, looking down. “It was exhausting, being angry as long as I was. I know it’s justified anger, but - you know. What was I supposed to do with it? I’ve already yelled at you guys enough, and punching people never solves things the way I wish it would.”

“I wouldn’t be upset if you punched me,” Wilbur says.

“Wilbur, you are a fucking crippled man who dices melons for me to eat every morning. I’m not punching you. That wouldn’t change anything, except make me feel bad later.”

“Oh, violence *isn’t* the only universal language!” Technoblade mimes a gasp. Phil sees Tommy lightly kick him from beneath the table.

“Of course not,” he says. “But you know that already.”

Techno sighs, dropping his demeanor. “Yeah. I do. I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. We’ve gotten over it.” Tommy pauses, and glances to Phil. “That’s - I mean, I’ve gotten over it. It happened, and I don’t feel angry or resentful about it anymore, and I think about you guys in the - context, I guess - of how you help me, not hurt me. Far more often than not, anyway, and the bad parts are usually with memories of before. I want to keep building a future with you guys. That’s moving on, isn’t it?”

“Does it - does it affect your life or emotions a lot?” Phil asks. “I think that’s how it’s defined. Do you still find yourself questioning your decisions, or whether you should be moving on, or how you feel about it?”

“I - not really? I think it’s something I just slowly decided. Came to terms with. Never really noticed it until you guys brought it up, but I think I’ve felt this way for a while.”

“It’s not really the kind of thing you can pinpoint to one time,” Techno says. “Like I’ve... slowly gotten used to the idea of not having to fight as my purpose. Am still getting used to it. I know I am, and I made the realization sometime, but that doesn’t make it...”

“It make it feel like it’s true,” Tommy finishes. “Yeah. But I *do* feel like its true for me - all this.”

He sweeps a hand across the room - the soft cushions, dim lights, and the four of them, Phil realizes, bundled close together.

“Then I think we can say you’ve moved on,” Phil says softly. He gives Tommy a smile. “There’s no right answers, really, but... it’s close to what we can reasonably get it.”

Tommy nods, exhaling. “Yeah. And then I thought - well, moving on doesn’t *mean* I’ve forgiven you guys, but I want to move on *with* you guys - and like I said, I’m not really angry anymore. I want to let the nightmares stay nightmares. I got used to the ravine a long time ago. I don’t want to be scared of actual blades and I don’t want to feel like every sudden loud noise is a potential explosive. I can’t control that, but it *has* gotten a lot better.”

“Do you - you know we’re trying,” Wilbur says. He lifts his head a bit, to meet Tommy’s eyes. “You know we’re trying our hardest to make up for L’Manberg. We can’t smooth it over like it didn’t happen, but we can shape the future to have better times. We want to.”

“Yeah.” Tommy nods. “I want to as well. I don’t - I don’t know if that counts as forgiveness. It might.”

“I think that depends on who you ask,” Phil says. “None of us really know right now, but... as long as we understand that, right?”

“Yeah,” Tommy says. “As long as we understand. And things are getting better, okay?”



“That’s right.” Techno downs the last of his tea. The mug clicks back on the table, all swirled maple patterns. “We’re getting better, and we understand. That’s what counts right now.”

A steady sort of assurance fills Phil’s chest.

“And we’ll work to keep it that way,” he says quietly.

## Chapter End Notes

eehhh not really satisfied with the way the prose is written in this chapter but i really dont want to revise that much again

i reply to comments live! [twitch](#)

[tumblr](#) and [twitter](#) for questions and art!

# livin' the dream, from back when we were seventeen

## Chapter Notes

[discord](#) to get pings for updates/discuss stuff!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Ranboo was offered a place on the voyage as well, but declined to come. Tommy recalls how extra nervous he had appeared, fingers fiddling together with the near shredded edge of a thick paper, tucked into a coat pocket - likely Tubbo's latest letter.

As bad as Tommy feels for him, there's little he can do. And so, he had bid farewell and is now walking down the gravel path to the beach, Techno and Wilbur in step behind him. *The Camarvan* rests serenely beside the distant dock, keeping company with a few other vessels.

His satchel is still slung around his shoulder, this time fitted with an additional loop of fabric to wind around his arm. Any thief will get a nasty surprise when they try to take it - not from the satchel or Tommy, but from a Techno ready to snatch them while they're distracted from the unexpected resistance.

Though, Techno threatening violence has taken an unfortunate new light now, and Tommy resolves to just shove any idiots away this time. It helps that he's decided to store the cloak in the ender chest when it's too hot. The satchel is useful for carrying food, water, money - as well as a few potions and, this time, a glowing Notch apple tucked beneath a secret fold - but Tommy's learned to leave little to chance.

Techno has his own bag, but Wilbur's shoulders are free. The steel tip of his cane glints like a diamond against the pebbled gray below, each step accompanied by the *tick, tick, tick* of metal striking rock. Tommy thinks the sound is far more satisfying than the distant, almost soundless sensation of a blade cleaving clean through flesh.

Of course, the fights were often far messier than clean cuts. Gorier. Dissolved from desperation.

But today is not a day to dwell on those memories, if Tommy has any say in it. Instead he walks beside his brothers in windy silence, steps almost bouncing. Today is a day where - well, quite frankly, they just hang out on a ship that's a bit too small to really be considered a ship. Probably playing solitaire or some other weird new game Wilbur makes up - he's been spouting something about "cuffstifists" or whatever it's called.

Phil is seated on a stone bench near the ocean when they near. His wings are drawn tight against his back, and his eyes are closed.

"Dadza," Wilbur says as he sits himself down as well.

"Hello, Wil," Phil says, eyes opening. He smiles at Wilbur - and then at Tommy and Techno, when he sees them approaching from the side as well.

"So," Tommy says. "Come to bid your sons farewell?"

Techno snorts. "Make sure you don't croak of old age by the time we're back, Phil."

"Of course I won't," Phil says, still smiling faintly. "I have you three to look forward to seeing again, even if your faces right now makes me want to tear my feathers out from anxiety."

"We'll be out of your hair soon enough," Wilbur says, rolling his eyes.

Phil reaches forward and hugs him, tight and drawn, before standing up and taking a step towards Tommy.

Tommy decides to subvert the expectation and rushes to wrap his arms around Phil first, hiding a smirk. Phil laughs in his arms, sound like a rough trill beside Tommy's ear.

Techno is next, suffering a full minute where Phil refuses to let go and Tommy joins in sometime early on. Techno gives Wilbur a suspicious look once he's released, which Wilbur does nothing to assuage with his own smirking expression. Tommy knows that, likely, Wilbur understands the opportunity to hug Techno - and mess with him - will be infinite once they're stuck on a ship together.

"Have fun," Phil says. "And get a good book deal, Techno - here's to hoping it hits some bestseller lists."

Techno laughs. "If I wanted to hit some lists, I'd just pay the people who write them a lot of money - but alright. See you soon, *Dadza*."

"Yeah, Dadza," Tommy snickers over Phil's despairing sigh of "*not you too*."

They're off to a good start, and they haven't even stepped foot on *The Camarvan* yet. He calls that a success. Little victories, after all.

~\*~

Wilbur likes - loves, even - telling stories. Just not writing them, like Techno.

Tommy, meanwhile, loves hearing them. It is about time Wilbur retells another - or, makes it up on his own. It's always hard to tell, with him.

"Okay, so this time our protagonist is a ghost," Wilbur says. He can walk through walls and can interaction with stuff, and he's tethered to the Overworld on unfinished business - however, he doesn't remember what that business is."

Nevermind - this one is definitely made up by Wilbur. A more casual type of story this time.

"Pulling out the amnesia trope again so soon?" Techno asks, raising an eyebrow. Wilbur rolls his eyes, and makes a shushing motion.

"This ghost only remembers the very happy parts of his life," he continues. "Whenever people try to tell him all the bad stuff he did when he was living, he just forgets it. Like how Tommy forgets to do the dishes whenever Techno asks him to--"

"-but I *do* forget," Tommy huffs. "I'm not doing it on purpose!"

"We know. And the ghost doesn't purposefully forget either," Wilbur says. "Of course, Techno forgets to do the dishes even more often than you, so that can be forgiven."

Techno settles for a few small grumbles, this time.

“*Anyway*, so we have a ghost who has unfinished business, but can’t remember what it is because he forgets anything bad that’s happened,” Wilbur says.

“So the unfinished business is something bad?”

“It’s what unfinished implies, Tommy! That he wasn’t happy and satisfied in life.”

“Like us?”

“Yes, Techno. Kind of like how we were.”

“So where’s the plot?”

“The plot,” Wilbur leans back. “Is that the man gets resurrected. With weird necromancy shit.”

“...that is a terrible way to resolve this conflict.”

“Hey! I didn’t write it!”

“You totally did!”

~\*~

When they see Beastire, the moon is still rising. A thousand winking lights rise from beneath the horizon.

If Risenulf is a city, Beastire is a powerhouse of a metropolis. It’s at least a thousand years old, and most of its inhabitants reside within 4 main half-circles of walls - it had originally just 1 in the early days, but as the population grew and more land turned to spaces for farming and residence, more layers of the stone and brick were constructed.

They dock in a port, and register at the office building overlooking that harbor - 1 of 2 the city has, though this one is emptier than Techno thinks it normally would be - and pay their way through the fees and questions.

The very inner district borders the ocean, so there are no wall checks to go through. Once this area served as residential in some places, but that hasn’t been the case for at least 3 hundred years. The buildings here are now either commercial, administrative, or serve a public function, though there’s still traces of their past to be seen. Warehouses torn from former apartment buildings, each room now serving as a storage space to be rented out, or a bank repurposed from what was obviously once a rich manor.

Techno knows his way around the city, having been here before a few times, so he keeps path while Tommy and Wilbur press close beside him. Despite the nighttime darkness, the city is still undoubtedly alive - people rush down the paved sidewalks like a hundred pebbles colliding down a waterfall, while the center roads rush with carriage transport. At some point, a few birds - pigeons - flap overhead, shapes oddly stark against the black, star-dotted night.

There is no fear of monsters here - lantern lights, powered by glowstone, redstone, or even sea lantern shards, chase away any potential blanket of darkness large enough to manifest the creatures.

At some point, Techno decides to keep a permanent hold on Wilbur's left arm. It's too easy to get lost, in a place like this. He can feel Tommy's eyes trained on his loose pink hair, a distinct marker.

"A few more minutes," Techno says. The publishing house will be closed by now, but the majority of hotels here are open every hour. He still remembers the address of the one he had stayed in last time - coincidentally, also while he was posing as a normal traveler, and not as Technoblade, the Blood God. Hotels typically refuse service when they know who he actually is - or formerly was.

Whichever it is.

They reach their destination without much trouble - *FTB Hospitality Center*, an older and more discreet hotel. It's not cheap by any means, but it shies away from marketing itself as the lavish expenditures certain other places are, which is about the right balance for them. A comfortable bed and room service are nice - literal diamond chandeliers are pointless.

Techno registers them like he did at the docks - curiously, there's more and more accounting to be done every time he visits Beastire - and leads them to their rooms. Tommy and Wilbur occasionally chatter, but he lets the conversation wash over him without comprehension. He's a little too tired navigating, rowing, and changing the sails for that.

Instead, once they reach their room - three beds, a washing area, a small study area with a decently sized table - Techno washes up, changes into nightclothes, and lets himself fall asleep to Tommy's slightly amused commentary in the background.

~\*~

Their canals will need yearly inspection.

Even now, Phil sees sections where the stone is loose, where dirt sloshes into mud too easily. Where algae and other water plants clump a bit too thick for his liking - thick enough that a particularly small and lucky spider monster might be able to skitter across.

That's good, really. It'll keep them alert, give them something to do. It's routine stretched thin, but routine nonetheless.

For now, Phil clears the plants. Packs the dirt. Fits the stone barriers tightly in place. Makes sure the small canals and reservoirs around their home are in working condition. The process is stretched over a few days, more to savor the time spent simply fixing and maintaining something he's helped craft. It's always been a feeling he loves on some deep, instinctual level.

Hah. It's even how he got his name - Philza *Minecraft*. Granted by some high priestess of some religion of some ancient civilization that existed 2000 years ago - back when last names were uncommon and reserved for people of distinguished renown.

How otherworldly - even *godly* - those humans and hybrids of then had regarded him as. The priestess had been daring to grant him a last name - many of her peers, he distantly recalls, had been sure he was a god, and one who would strike her down for daring to apply a human custom to him, as though they were on the same level.

Of course, the most of the world know better nowadays, with Overworlders having explored the End and survived, and brought back texts to be translated. Immortal and gifted of flight End avians may be, they are far from gods.

In all his travels, Phil has yet to encounter anyone or anything that suggests godhood, at least in the context of what humans typically think of as gods. Powerful, ancient beings - yes. Gods - infallible, domain encompassing gods - no.

What he has learned, over the course of his life, is that given the right tools, setting, and motivation, everything - *everything* - can be destroyed.

"It's kind of a relief, when you think about it," Phil says. His companion gives in single, affirming bark.

He slices aside another tangle of bushes with his sword - thankfully, he remembered to grab the one not enchanted with fire aspect this time. The forest he's exploring right now isn't close enough to their mountain that they would really need to worry about a fire spreading, but he'd still rather not set any trees aflame right now.

"Everyone is fallible. Everyone can make mistakes. There's no absolute authority on anything. It means there's always a chance to win, you know?"

Clementine woofs softly, and leaps ahead to press her nose into a berry bush.

Phil stops beside it, enjoying the cool night shade. Monsters only attack humans and most hybrids with provocation, so he's never had to deal with the dangers of exploring the woods at night. End avians are a completely foreign entity from a different dimension - technically, he's an invasive species. The ghosts in the Nether can certainly attest to his ecological damage, as Techno would say.

It's been rather hot for a few days now, especially with how often he flies and explores the mountains. With his sons on their own trip, Phil has figured now's the opportunity to get to know the mountain range around their home a little more. It's hard to go wrong with a leisurely walk among nature.

The range is called the Western Mountains - at least, among the people living on the east coast of the continent. Phil suspects the people living on the west side of it would have a considerably different name, not that most people around here know what it is - there is, after all, a giant mountain range making communication and travel between the two sides rather difficult.

Phil flies it with little resistance, however, and so can his sons. Except Wilbur - long distance elytra flight is really, really not recommended with that crippled leg. No steerability, like a bird with half its tail feathers pulled. Phil will have to come up with a solution one day, but for now he's content to stay around their current home a little while longer.

Clementine appears finished with her brief examination of the berry bush, ending with a few large dark stains around her mouth. She trots further through the forest again, and Phil snags a handful of the berries - elderberries - and pops one in his mouth before following her. It bursts with tart, latent sweetness in his mouth; they're surprisingly ripe.

Leaves sigh in a thousand wilts beneath his boots. The forests are not quiet tonight, like they aren't most nights - critters are always scurrying beneath darkness' cover, and predators are always tracking their tiny, pittering footsteps. Crickets chirp for each other and fireflies flare the occasional burst of glow-yellow light in the darkness.

The air is damp today, a colder kind of humidity that seems to cling like droplets on Phil's feathers. His skin is cold, despite his movements, and every breath feels like inhaling thin clouds.

It had rained hard and long earlier, and water still splashes with every movement. Phil had made sure to put on his most waterproof set of boots for this little impromptu hiking trip, but he suspects he will still be wringing water out of his socks when he gets home.

Oh, well. He's borne more discomfort to satisfy less.

He idly reimagines the dark shapes of the tree canopy above, like how one might do to clouds - that black shape a moon rabbit, that black shape a chorus plant (and goodness, has it been a while since he's had popped chorus fruit) and that black shape an abstract painting Techno might gift him for an art collection - and seriously, too.

Clementine barks again, somewhere ahead. The sound echoes like a woodchime, and sounds a bit more urgent than it usual.

Phil picks up his pace, whacking away another clump of dead leaves and branches. It doesn't hurt to be prepared.

When he arrives beside Clementine, she's wagging her tail while circling a small, twitching white shape on the ground. It's a pigeon - and it has to be a domesticated one, since the black eyes means it isn't albino, and no natural white pigeon species would evolve in the wild.

Indeed, the pigeon doesn't try to flap away when Phil scooped it up, not that it could have flown - both its wings are broken. One is torn nearly in half, the pale glint of bone exposed in the moonlight, gushing with a moat of blood. Soft wheezing sounds emanate from the bird's bloody beak and throat.

Phil sighs. This pigeon isn't likely to live much longer - too much blood loss, and birds are susceptible to traumatic shock as well. The main question is what happened to it.

Wild predator, probably. The way the wing is torn reminder him of mountain leopards, and he's decently sure those marks on its throat match the description of their teeth as well.

The white pigeon twitches again, once, twice - and then, it stills. Blood continues to stream down its wounds, coating Phil's hand and wrist in rivulets of red.

"Any secrets you might have been hiding?" Phil asks softly.

He examines the body twice over, and finds a small wrapping of wax paper half-embedded into its breast. With a tilt and shake it slides enough to pinch and coax out, and Phil wraps a spare strip of cloth he has around it. Slowly, he slides the tiny package into his cloak pocket.

Then, he gently lays the bundle of feathers, blood, and pale pink flesh onto the grass of leaves beneath. The forest continues its murmurings and its mutterings, soft and wavy static, content to swallow another death.

"We've been walking out here for a few hours," Phil says. "I think it's about time we get some actual sleep at home, Clementine. Don't you think?"

Clementine, like usual, responds with a bark. Phil smiles, and kneels down with his arms outstretched. She clambers into them without hesitation.

He rises again, this time with a dog wagging her tail lazily in his arms. Looking up, he scans until he sees a large emptiness in the dark canopy of stories above. An infinite patch of starlight. With a few powerful strokes, he's among that emptiness once again, and this time towards their mountain home in the distance.

~\*~

The next morning, they locate the publishing house with relative ease. Wilbur and Tommy quickly decide to entertain themselves at nearby shops and stands while Techno conducts his business.

The *Karl Jacobs Publishing Center* is the foremost publishing house in Beastire (not that there's much competition), as well as one of the leading ones on Novixl's east coast (not that the areas west of the Western Mountains provide much competition).

Point is, not only does the Karl Jacobs Publishing Center have continental reach, with the ability to market and ship books across Novixl, it also has some cross-continental reach - if they can't spread a book to Pyserne and the smaller continents and islands, then they have contracts with other publishing houses that can and will.

Overall, Phil chose and negotiated well.

Standing in front of the building's doors, however, Techno is suddenly struck by a different kind of doubt.

Before, he had always made deals and appearances as Whitelisted with a hood shadowing him, and simple cloth scarf over his lower face. He *does* have that appearance right now - cloak over his head, scarf up, which even compliments the cooling weather well - but he's not sure whether he should keep it up. At least, with the appearances.

He had been afraid of people connecting Whitelisted and Technoblade, the Blood God, before - people might see the common appearance and draw the conclusions. So, Whitelisted's face is for all intents and purposes unknown to the public, in the rare few times confirmed sightings of the author has been made.

Technically, people don't know the Blood God's face either - Techno always has his skull mask on when he's making himself known. It doesn't hurt to be extra cautious, though - and in the Pogtopia rebellion, that rule for himself had come rather loose. He's decently sure at least a few dozen people outside his family at least glimpsed his face there, despite how often he tried to make himself scarce when not alone with Wilbur or Tommy.

But, if he's not going to keep up the whole Blood God thing anymore, maybe he won't need to bother. Maybe he can leave a far better legacy in the world, and elevate that achievement far above any battle or duel he's won.

The manuscript of his book burns a rectangle against his side. Techno forces a deep breath.

There might be a time where anonymity is required again. So, just in case. He can always reveal his face as Whitelisted later, but he can't undo that reveal. Better not take any risks.

With a small sigh, he tugs the scarf higher over his nose bridge and makes sure his cloak is secured. He clutches his satchel a little tighter - in there is, along with the book manuscript and normal supplies, a swath of oiled fabric nestling an ember-warm nether star.

Techno clears his throat, steels his voice. Then, he pulls open the glass doors and steps into the building.

~\*~

"So do you think the honey flavored or vanilla flavored one tastes better?" Tommy asks.



“Vanilla,” Wilbur responds, swiping another one of the candies from the small cup Tommy holds. “This honey’s a bit too sweet.”

“Yeah, I think so too,” Tommy hums. “I’d hate to waste it, though, and I don’t think Techno would appreciate it any more than us.”

“It doesn’t look like it spoils,” Wilbur says, peering at the piece of candy in his hand a little closer. “Maybe we can wrap it up for Phil. He would love it.”

“Yeah, he would,” Tommy agrees. Wilbur pops the chewy candy into his mouth - the wafer section crunches beneath his teeth like a thousand pieces of sand. Very satisfying.

Hm, wait - Wilbur’s pretty sure that’s a different sound. An increasingly louder - and vaguely familiar - one.

Tommy freezes, and stops beside him. Wilbur follows suit to realize most people around them, on the sidewalks and streets and gathered around market stalls - have stopped their activities and are now blinking around in mild confusion.

The rumbly, cracking noise, like stone shattering in a grind mill, swells in volume. Tommy takes a step closer to Wilbur - he can feel his brother’s grip tighten around his arm.

And then, all of the sudden, Wilbur’s ears are free. Quiet.

In the middle of the street, a few feet away, a Nether portal has manifested. A few moments later, soldiers armed with iron and glimmering diamond rush out the purple haze. They slam into the pedestrians around them - most people scatter back and run, but a few fall with blood streaming out of stab wounds.

The pressure on Wilbur’s arm constricts like boa, tight. He blinks, and watches the life pour out of at least a dozen people before him on the smooth, paved andesite.

Tommy yanks him when the soldiers being advancing again - and then, something massive shakes the ground, like an earthquake - *like a bomb*.

*Like a bomb has gone off, and he knows it, has felt it rattling every bone like he might be turned inside-out.*

This is - this is an attack. It’s a fucking attacking. Another nation is attacking Beastire, and their soldiers are out to kill, and they’re using *fucking explosives*-

Wilbur just barely glimpses the burst of fire from distant building before he’s scrabbling back towards the direction of the publishing house on knees too weak and hands too shaky, cane slamming on stone like a tympani struck, Tommy pulling with his breath shallow right beside him.

## Chapter End Notes

## there's strength in arches

### Chapter Notes

there is blood and death of humans in this chapter. i would not called the description overly graphic, but i would call it frank.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The nether star nearly burns a scorch mark on the table when he sets it down. Techno's forgotten how much heat they contain.

A hilarious look of amazement manifests from everyone else in the room when they see his hand uncurl from the star unburned - those people being an editor, and a few managers of the publishing house. Apparently, he's considered a high profile case.

*A Comprehensive History and Treatise of Potato Farming* doesn't exactly sound like a "high profile" book deal, and the less people interacted with the better here, in Techno's opinion, but at least he still remembers how these negotiations should go.

It's a relatively painless process, this time. After so much effort, he's less interested in getting the best deal possible and more in just publishing the thing and moving onto the next writing project. Wilbur's ants have proven themselves to be rather fascinating; eusocial insects are probably next on the study list. Maybe he could even convince Wilbur to co-author.

"I just sign here, and then I'm done, right?" Techno asks, gesturing at the terms on the table. "Sorry, it's been a while since I've done this. As many people like to remind me."

He had been bombarded with questions the moment he introduced himself as Whitelisted in the publishing house's lobby. It had been a Herculean endeavor itself to get him into a private room.

"Just the signature, yes, and leave the manuscript with us," one of the managers - Preston - confirms. "And there's more than enough witnesses here-"

The world shakes, like an earthquake is gripping them, slammed with a dull, thundering sound.

Techno frowns. Beastire's region has never recorded experiencing earthquakes severe enough to do more than rattle a few thin books before.

It passes into silence - and then, flares up again. This time, Techno recognizes what it is.

Explosives.

"What-" one of the managers begins, and cuts off when Techno shoots up from his seat and stalks over to the window.

"Take a look yourself," he says grimly.

Through the glass, Beastire is on fire.

It's only in a few dotted places, but around the smoke-dusted flames are stone rubble and bloodied bodies. Victims of bomb attacks. He's too familiar with the sight.

The world rumbles and shakes again - the manager beside him flinches, but Techno doesn't. He sees the explosion as it happens, half a mile away - the roof of white marble building collapsing in a shower of fire and rubble.

The screaming terror of the people swarming the streets only grow louder.

This is the innermost region of Beastire, within all 4 walls, where almost every building is constructed of stone or some non-flammable material. But that doesn't change the fact that there is currently an attack happening.

Techno's eyes flit across the streets - and finally, he spots it.

There's a Nether portal. And streaming out of it are foreign soldiers, now butchering any civilian they come across. They seem to be split into two groups - one marching towards the harbors, and another towards what Techno presumes is the administrative center of the city. Probably whatever central government building that is, or perhaps the bank.

He's not sure, but he's willing to bet the soldiers are from Chester. They're the only other city powerful enough to stage an attack like this, and given how just a while earlier Beastire had overtaken one of their Nether fortresses...

There's little time for contemplation. Techno spends a final few seconds scanning for Wilbur or Tommy, but he sees neither, especially among the dead bodies.

That's - that's good. They know what they're doing. They know to escape. They have to be fine.

They *have* to be fine. And Techno's job is to make sure they stay that way.

"Where are you doing?" Preston asks as Techno barrels his way out the door. "It's safer to stay inside-"

Techno doesn't bother with a reply.

He nearly vaults himself over the stair railings, and hits the ground floor with a sharp thud. Various heads turn to him - most of which are also hiding beneath desks or behind bookshelves. Techno ignores them all and throws the glass doors open.

The streets are wide, and by now mostly deserted of the living.

Techno leaps over several dead bodies and begins scaling the first climbable wall he sees. The brick is a dark black color, like dried cake beneath his fingers as they're dug into.

Once he's on the roof, Techno throws down the ender chest from his satchel and taps the button that widens it to full size. From it, he pulls out his sword, crossbow, netherite armor, as well every potion he can carry in his pockets and hang from his belt. He downs a speed potion in the process. Finally, he shoves three glimmering Notch apples into a small, spare bag tied to his belt as well.

With a sinking feeling, Techno realizes Tommy and Wilbur don't have access to an ender chest. That means they won't be able to get their weapons, armor, or other supplies - and between the two, they only have one Notch apple which Tommy is currently carrying.

That's not good. At all. And if one of them are to become seriously injured... well, not even a Notch apple can stitch up a slash wound through the stomach, or replace gallons of blood. It speeds recovery and gives more resistance, but it can't do miracles.

Techno is the one with all the potion supplies, and the medical equipment. He's the one who can fight off a dozen soldiers without breaking stride. He has to protect them.

But to do that they have to be *together*. And to be together, he has to find them.

Problem is - he has no idea where to start.

~\*~

Tommy had hoped they wouldn't need to stop running until they're safe. Unfortunately, the attacking soldiers seem determined to be annoying bitches.

Wherever they're from, they're clearly under orders to purposefully up civilian casualty count. Probably here to take over the whole city. Tommy hopes they don't succeed - that wouldn't bode well for Techno's book deal.

It also wouldn't bode well for them. Considering how any soldiers they come across move to run their swords through them.

"Any idea where to hide?" Tommy hisses to Wilbur as they duck into an alleyway. This one is, thankfully, not flooded with blood.

"If we get to *The Camarvan*," Wilbur whispers quickly, "we could hide at sea until this blows over."

"But Techno-"

"Techno has the ender chest," Wilbur says, though his breath hitches. "And he's *Techno*. He'll be - be way more upset if we don't try to get out of here."

Tommy takes a deep breath. Fuck, they were only supposed to be apart for an hour or so as Techno worked out his book deal - *of course* Beastire had to get attacked during the one stretch of time they were apart. He had tried to navigate them towards the publishing house originally, but the way had been blocked by too many soldiers.

This is a well planned attack. It's been at least 10 minutes since the first explosions - *fucking explosions* - and the city's own soldiers, wherever they're stationed, aren't here yet. Something is likely holding them up.

Who knows, maybe a few well placed bombs killed them all.

"Right," Tommy says, and repeats the word to himself a few more times, quieter, until the beating of his chest evens out to a pace that doesn't feel like a fleeing jackrabbit. "Right. Harbor. Ship. Let's go and hope we don't - encounter any fucking bitches."

He holds out an arm and Wilbur slings his own over it, their shoulders overlapping. With Tommy to support him, he can move just slightly faster - but of course, they can't *run*.

That's fine. Along the way Tommy had managed to snag an iron hoe from one of the dead bodies now piled on the streets. His boots are stained dark from wading through the blood puddles to get it.

Hoes are basically very flat clubs anyway. He can whack people dead with it, no problem.

The streets are mostly cleared of other moving people, though a few bleeding bodies twitch pitifully - swarms had stuffed themselves into various buildings, and still others had fled to the wall borders to try and hide in the outer rings of the city, as of now still untouched by the foreign soldiers.

Tommy doesn't know where the exits to the outer regions are, and he doesn't trust a bomb not to collapse a building's roof on them. He's spotted how they're dropped - from the talons of pigeons, of all things. He knew those fuckers were evil.

Alright, not *evil*, probably. But seriously, who the fuck trains pigeons to drop bombs over a city?

Despite the distant screaming, the streets they hobble down hold a desolate kind of eerie silence. No one hiding in the buildings wants to attract attention, after all, and anyone else on the streets are running too fast for their lives to sound anything but the harsh tap of shoes on paved stone.

Tommy sees a few throw pitying glances at them as they pass. None expect Wilbur and him to survive moving at this hobbling pace.

He's cursing that sentiment a few minutes later when three soldiers spot them stumbling down the sidewalk. His one hand is supporting Wilbur, and worst case scenario he can sling Wilbur into his arms and carry him like Techno did back in the Nether - but he can't swing a hoe or dodge if he's doing that.

"You really don't need to bother with us," Tommy tries as the soldiers approach them, one with his sword drawn and the other two with hands on the hilts. "We're not even from here - as you can tell by the accent. Let a crippled man and his brother hide."

He's using Twitieric right now, which is what Beastire's citizens speak. Hopefully, at least one of them understands the language.

Upon seeing the uncertain glances the soldiers throw each other, he adds, "please?"

As much as he loathes begging, Tommy's learned that soldiers - and civilians - who are willing to grovel a bit do generally survive better.

The man in the lead glances at Tommy, and then studies Wilbur's leg with a long, piercing stare. Finally, he waves a hand, and all three soldiers turn to continue down the streets without a further glance.

"Holy fuck," Tommy says as their backs turn around a corner. "That actually worked."

"I think I reminded the leader of someone," Wilbur says as they begin making their way towards the harbor again. The tapping of his cane abruptly softens as they begin crossing a stretch of grass, thickened with trees and bushes and beds of flowers. A public park space, Tommy guesses.

He considers the merits of hiding in a tree for a while - but no, then they'd really be sitting ducks if a bomb dropped on them. Out at sea is the only place they can guarantee safety, especially since the vast majority of other people are crowding the wall exits.

If only they had their elytras. But both his cloak and Wilbur's elytra are in the ender chest.

Fuck. They didn't exactly anticipate to get caught in a battle between two major powers along Novixl's east coast today.

It occurs to Tommy that Beastire is rather well set up to defend against a siege - but that also makes it difficult to *escape* an attack.

Also, while using Nether portals to get somewhere specific in the Overworld isn't unheard of, and the mathematical knowledge to calculate placements have been known for at least a few decades - or so Techno says - how the fuck did they march an army across that hellscape?

"At least this attack is interesting," Wilbur comments. "I would love to know how they trained the pigeons to do that. It might be a good way to mass spread news leaflets as well as bombs."

"You can talk with Techno about new war technologies later," Tommy grunts. "When we survive this."

They have to survive this. He really doesn't fancy getting dragged through the veils of death by Phil's necromancy - Tommy's heard it's a very unpleasant experience.

Also, he'd poked his head in Phil's experiment room back in their old house a few times. Creepiest fucking things he's ever seen.

And of course - dying is decidedly an activity Tommy has towards the very bottom of his bucket list. Wilbur dying is even lower.

It's after another little while of half-walking, half-shambling when they encounter more enemy soldiers, which they duck behind a building to avoid until they're gone. There's less around them than what's expected - Tommy suspects most of them are busy holding down the administrative buildings and securing the exits. That's what an attacking army would logically do. Killing as many people as possible along the way probably means they're planning to annex this place entirely and don't want pesky outside rebellions popping up.

This is probably one of the most, if not the most important event in Beastire's very, very long history. Depends on if this attack succeeds.

Tommy can't bring himself to care that much. Techno, on the other hand, will find it fascinating. If they all make it out alive.

He bites back a sigh. Techno will be fine. Probably. Hopefully, he's not freaking out *too* much over having not found Tommy and Wilbur yet. And that he realizes what they're planning to do.

"Halt!"

Tommy scowls as two soldiers rush toward them, swords outstretched. He quickly leans Wilbur against the dark stone wall of a building - some sort of bakery - and brandishes his hoe.

He can't make escape his plan, since Wilbur can't keep up with him. So he'll have to either kill them, or beat them up enough to convince them they're not worth the trouble.

The first one advances with his sword - probably steel, Tommy guesses. Higher quality blade than iron, at the cost of inability to hold enchantments.

It's struck away with the hoe's iron edge. A flash of surprise overtakes the soldier's face - this one has to be inexperienced, then, if he's surprised civilians will fight back. Probably his first battle - attacking a city Beastire's size will require some new conscription.

Tommy takes two quick steps forward and swings the sharp edge of his hoe into the soldier's exposed neck. The flesh tears softly with spurts of blood - Tommy suppresses a shudder at the familiar sound of squelching and gurgling. The soldier's body crumples onto the pavement, eyes now forever trapped in a wide, glassy stare of horror.

"Fuck off and I won't do this to you too," Tommy hisses at the other soldier. Unfortunately, he only responds by drawing out his sword, though there's a raised eyebrow beneath the helmet.

The movement is practiced, smooth, which knots Tommy's stomach.

If Tommy moves from his protective position, he'll probably go after Wilbur. But he can still lure him a bit further away.

He takes a step forward, and draws himself taller. Projects more forcefulness to his voice.

"Leave," he snaps. "Or I *will* put this hoe through your fucking skull."

The soldier actually seems to falter a bit - Tommy knows he's somewhat tall, but is he really *that* intimidating?

It doesn't matter, anyway. The soldier stiffens again and forwards with a sharp jab, which Tommy barely avoids. He ducks down and somersaults across hard pavement. A kick at the end strikes flesh and bone - the soldier collapses with a yelp as Tommy rises up. He's stabbing the head of his hoe through the neck a moment later.

Sharp pain flares against Tommy's side as he takes a step back towards Wilbur, who's rifling through Tommy's satchel with eyes still darting around.

"Let's go," Tommy says - and then winces as another wave of pain hits him. He looks down.

The soldier had managed to slice his sword into Tommy as he fell. There's a long, thin gash just above his hip - and fuck, Tommy's forgotten how much that hurts.

"Did it hit any organs?" Wilbur asks, stumbling over to him. Tommy holds out an arm to steady both of them.

"Do not worry, brother," he says, managing a grin. "'tis but a flesh wound."

"You are not funny," Wilbur says, lips thin as he uncorks a healing potion and, soaking a handkerchief with it, lifts up Tommy's shirt and begins dabbing the wound. "That was awful. Don't do that again."

"My jokes are fucking amazing. Pinnacle of humor." Tommy chances a glance around them with his head. He doesn't see any more soldiers, and only the occasional fleeing civilian, which is good. Hopefully, it lasts.

Probably not, but one can hope.

The pain dulls a bit as the potion does its work. The wound isn't too deep overall, but potions can't fix everything - wounds often tear open again if the body isn't rested after application.

Unfortunately, they don't have a few days for Tommy to take things easy.

"Let me carry you," Tommy says, suppressing a wince. "We can't stay here any long."

“No,” Wilbur immediately says. “You’ll probably start bleeding again and collapse.”

“Then...” Tommy glances at his bag. “What if you ate the Notch apple? Soldiers will probably go after you as soon as they can, so you might as well-”

“You’re the one doing the fighting, though,” Wilbur says. “The effects don’t last long. Let’s save it for if one of us gets a dangerous injury.”

He glances at his gold-veined wrists, and adds, “the totem going off could buy us a few seconds anyway, if we need time to eat.”

Tommy glances at his own wrist - the wires glint in the sunlight, shimmering as though enchanted. He’d forgotten they’re even there.

“Alright,” he concedes, and holds out his arm again. “Come on, let’s go.”

Wilbur drapes his arm over Tommy’s and shifts his weight over. They begin their half-gaited walk towards the harbor once more.

~\*~

*There’s a lot of Beastire ships in our harbor right now. I don’t like this at all. I know it’s the height of outward trade season, but it feels like half the city’s fleet is in Chester’s waters.*

*Considering how we’re, you know, decades long enemies - I have no idea why the Prince has decided to let this trade continue. Especially after they attacked our Nether outpost! We just barely won the battle to get it back.*

*I say, we encircle the Beastire ships one night and set them all on fire. What can that city do? They’ve tried to siege Chester a dozen times and failed. Our geography is too secure.*

*I think the Prince and his Counsel know the inevitability of more conflict, however. They’ve upped conscription - not me, thankfully, for I am considered too old to be of use - but my son got a summoning letter today. I do hope he comes back alright. Apparently, whispers also abound that our navy size is increasing.*

*Hopefully, those tax dollars are being put to good use. As a shipwright, I’d be very disappointed if they didn’t consult one of us before making the purchases, since they’re being bought and not constructed by our own reliable hands. What do they even need more ships for in such a hurry anyway? Could have at least used the opportunity to give the local industry a little boost.*

The rest of the letter is torn and too stained with pigeon blood to make out the faint words. Phil smooths the yellowed paper onto the table one more time, reaches down to stroke Clementine’s fur, and takes a deep breath.

Well. He’s been trying to piece together these half-scratched words for long enough. Time to go to sleep.



they said writing fanfic and playing minecraft instead of paying attention to ap world class wasnt going to get me a good score on the exam.

jokes on them i got a 5. most of those people who bothered to take notes did not get a 5. who's laughing now?

# i thought i couldn't love anymore

## Chapter Notes

over 200k words pog, here [discord](#) link for more fun stuff

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Techno realizes, after a short while leaping rooftops while occasionally dodging arrows, that searching like this is unlikely to get him anywhere.

Or, more correctly, he made the realization as soon as he put the idea into execution, and just ignored it because there is little else he can think of.

He's seen by now that there's more than one Nether portal, though the flow of new soldiers has mostly stopped. And Beastire is beginning to fight back - when he nears a wall tunnel, he spots Beastire's armed soldiers engaging combat, however scattered it is. Most are probably defending from the other side of the wall.

The soldiers need time to gear up and work out where to receive commands from - and by now, someone in the military chain has to be directing *something*.

Chester's commanders aren't reachable, and even if he could get a few bribes in place there's no way for them to spread word through their soldiers anyway. Beastire, on the other hand...

Techno wraps his pale blue scarf around his lower face one more time, and makes sure the knot is tightened. His hood is flicked off - the reduced vision is too much to justify the anonymity shield, so he'll just have to hope no one makes any wayward connections. Shame his helmet doesn't solve much.

The ridiculousness of the idea will twist it into a conspiracy theory, anyway. He'll just have to play it as such if questions are brought up.

Atop the innermost wall of Beastire, the ramparts are surprisingly empty. He crouches low as he skitters towards the railing - no need to make himself a target for arrows again - and reaches a pole that slides down to the ground floor.

The 2nd Ring, as the area between the first and second wall is known as, houses the military barracks and equipment. When not under active siege, it's run by only a few hundred soldiers. Right now, the area is teeming with a 2 or 3 thousand - not enough to drive off Chester's forces, but enough to keep them from breaching the wall tunnels and overrunning the rest of the city from the inside out - hopefully until more support arrives from the residential districts.

With a small jolt, Techno realizes he left his manuscript back at the publishing house. He'll just have to hope no explosives hit it - he hasn't heard any new ones in a while, which bodes well. Chester probably wants to avoid hitting their own soldiers, now that their forces are more spread out in the city.

Several Beastire soldiers whip their weapons towards him as he lands. Many are half equipped, armor straps still loose and soft nightclothes showing beneath.

Techno winces as someone grabs his cloak hood, tightening a pressure on his neck. This is a risky strategy - but he's relying on reputation and a few failsafes to get him through.

Just not the reputation and failsafes he's used to. But what choice does he have?

"Relax," he says, trying to press a measure of Beastire's elongated, emphatic accent into his tone. "I wish to speak with whatever commander is in charge right now."

"That would be me." A man pushes through the crowd until he's a dozen or so feet away. "If you're a registered soldier, you should know better than to show up dressed like that. If you want to volunteer, you should be with Captain Kakujo in District 3A."

"I think we both know I'm not here to be a normal soldier," Techno cuts in. "Perhaps you've heard of me - according to the publishers, my arrival was anticipated with quite a stir among the authorities here. I'm Whitelisted."

Several soldiers glance around with mild confusion, but others widen their eyes. The commander remains still, without visible change in expression.

"And how do I know you tell the truth?" he asks.

Techno reaches into the fold of his cloak - the soldiers around him bristle, but he pulls out only a folded piece of paper and tosses it onto the grass at the commander's feet.

It's a copy of the book deal agreement for *Antarctic Voyages*, which had been made with the *Earth Printing Company* 4 years ago. He had brought it, and some copies of other deals, as definitive proof of his identity for the current book deal. It even has the company's official seal, and several signatures.

"I know you can claim forgery, but quite frankly, you know Whitelisted is in the city and there's only so many places he would go," Techno says as the commander's eyes scan the paper.

Eventually, he nods. "Escort him to the office. We'll talk more there."

Techno keeps his face impassive as he follows the commander towards the tallest building among the barracks, two dozen soldiers following close behind. He keeps his internal sigh of relief at bay - the first step hadn't gone disastrously, but Techno's plans are usually far more thought out and tight knit than this.

He may as well be flying blind here. And there's little knowing whether Tommy or Wilbur were lucky enough to not get hit by the bombs or debris, or encounter too many Chester soldiers.

They could be dead already. Techno knows how easily people die - how unfortunately often luck plays a factor. But until he has bodies-

No. He can't afford to think down this path right now.

Once he's inside the office building, and led to sit down in a chair without much illusion of choice in the matter, the commander turns to face him while standing.

Techno resists the urge to raise an eyebrow at the attempt at intimidation - he can't afford to get on this person's bad side, in case he's the egotistical or resentful type.

"First of all, I am Lieutenant Jacobs, overseer of the 2nd division," Jacobs says. "Our head general has just been killed in action, which Chester troops are currently cheering about, and the leadership position is a bit unclear right now. Me and Captain Kakujo have taken the main reins in defending Beastire."

Techno idly wonders if he's related to Karl Jacobs - probably, since powerful men usually have powerful families.

"If you mean us any harm, know that everyone around here will not hesitate to put a sword through you, famous author or not," Jacobs continues. "But I presume you are here to seek protection?"

"I can handle my own protection," Techno says evenly. "Me surviving to give primary accounts of several wars was not merely an endeavor in taunting luck. However, during this trip I was in the company of my brothers, and we were separated in chaos - above all, I wish to secure their safety."

Jacobs frowns. "I cannot send forces out on suicide missions to search for-"

"I'm not asking for a search party," Techno says. Too late, he remembers he shouldn't interrupt, but thankfully Jacobs doesn't look too irritated. "I'm asking that first, should your men come across my brothers, they be led into protective custody. Secondly, since the safety of Beastire will help greatly in my own search-"

He takes a deep breath, smothering down a shudder.

This is different. He is not acting as the Blood God, herald of death and destruction. He is not here to satisfy a thirst for violence which does not exist.

He is here for Tommy and Wilbur, and he will keep them safe.

*No matter what.*

"-I will provide any assistance I can to drive off Chester's invasion."

"What kind of... *assistance* can you provide?" Jacobs asks. "We don't need a journalist writing stories from the sideline."

"Well," Techno says, expression flat, "the two dozen wither skulls and bundles of dynamite in my ender chest may be of interest to you."

Incredulity flashes in Jacobs' eyes.

"And," Techno presses, "I presume Chester has made moves towards securing Beastire's harbors?"

"We *have* received word of a naval blockade," Jacobs says, now looking a bit less reluctant. "And Chester soldiers are cutting off harbor access by land too."

Techno nods. His fingers itch, as though curled around a phantom shape - round and shriveled and dripping with a horrible, ancient power.

"Let me have a look at the logistics you have, Jacobs - and then, we have a city to take back."

The Blood God is - no, that's not quite right.

The Blood God cared for victory and spectacle. The Blood God is the fear of his enemies, is rows first place claims and a death toll exponentially rising.

The Blood God is steeped in war and reputation, and the Blood God is *dead*.

Never again will Techno allow himself to be clouded from his family by the expectations the world has draped like a costume over him. Never again will he lose sight of what should have been his goal since Phil first tucked him beneath his wing and introduced him to his older brother.

The Blood God is dead, and here remains Technoblade, shrouded of nothing but empty air and husk. And Technoblade will do *anything* to ensure his family is safe.

~\*~

They see the soldiers before they see the ocean, holding lines between them and the piers.

"*Fuuuuck*," Tommy snarls, jerking his head back out of sight. "They're swarming the place - willing to bet they got some naval blockade going on too. There's no way we're sneaking past *that*."

"Maybe we could find a closer ship to hide on," Wilbur says. "Wait it out."

Tommy shakes his head. "I saw them doing inspections of vessels too. We'd be trapped if they see us."

Fuck, *fuck*. He should have known they would target Beastire's harbors too, cut off water access. The city is surrounded - at least the bomb attacks seem to have stopped.

"We could try to huddle here until something happens," Tommy mutters. "But there's no way I can keep fighting off anyone who comes across us."

A look of hesitation flashes across Wilbur.

"What is it?"

Wilbur sighs. "We could try to convince them we're Whitelisted's brothers."

"But we don't have any proof," Tommy points out. "People claim they're related to famous people all the time - I saw it happen a lot. Never works."

"Right," Wilbur exhales. "This isn't the parliament. Sorry, it was just a thought."

"Don't be sorry." Tommy presses his head against Wilbur's neck, briefly, letting himself soak in the warmth for a few blissful moments. "We need all the ideas we can get right now."

"Problem is, anything we do to attract Techno would attract soldiers a lot sooner," Wilbur says. "I don't think we should stay here - maybe we could find a way to sneak through one of the walls and hide in the residential districts. I'm pretty sure only the inner district has been taken. Problem is that all the exits are guarded."

"We could swim around," Tommy muses. "The walls are sort of a half-circle shape that end at the ocean, so maybe I could drag you through the water and hope no one notices us."

Upon seeing the skeptical look on Wilbur's face, he drops his head. "Yeah, that doesn't sound like a good idea."

Wilbur peers his head out from the alleyway for just a quick moment, before ducking back in.

"What if... what if we used a Nether portal?" he asks. "There's a few just on the streets now, and we can survive the Nether better than here."

Tommy winces. He had agreed with Techno and Phil that giving Wilbur experience with the navigating the Nether would be a good idea, but he hadn't expected the practice to come up so *soon*.

"There has to be soldiers guarding them from the other side," he points out.

Wilbur pauses. "Wait - what if we found some obsidian and lit one ourselves?"

"And where are we getting obsidian?"

"The architect's place has some. A lot, actually."

Tommy blinks.

Oh, right. He'd forgotten portal construction is an architect's job.

"Do you know where that is?" he asks.

Wilbur nods. "I saw it when Techno was leading us to the publishing house - it's about a 15 minute walk away. Well, probably a lot longer since we're avoiding soldiers, but the path takes us away from the harbor too."

"Sounds like a plan - sort of," Tommy says.

Get to the architect's building - center, office, whatever it's called - while avoiding the invading force that's trying to annex the city and kills civilians on sight, find the obsidian in the architect's building, somehow build a portal, light it, and hopefully step into a part of the Nether that isn't overrun with soldiers or lava.

Great. Nothing about this could possibly go wrong.

"If we die, we'll probably get to come back as ghosts," Wilbur offers weakly. "Until Phil crafts bodies for us, anyway. It might be fun?"

"No fucking thanks," Tommy mutters. "I very much like this body. And being alive."

He narrows his eyes. "And so should you, Wilbur. None of this death bullshit, you get me?"

"O-oh. Yeah."

Tommy really hopes that wasn't much more than a joke to Wilbur.

He checks their surroundings one more time; the coast is relatively clear. And he sees a few buildings they can hopefully sneak through in instead of using the streets.

"Alright, Wilbur," Tommy says. "Lead the way."

“Of course,” Wilbur says. His arm tightens around Tommy’s shoulder, and his cane strikes hard stone - then, they step onto the light.

~\*~

“You want to unleash an *entire* wither on the Chester army,” Jacobs repeats.

“There are at least a thousand Chester soldiers condensed in this area,” Techno says. “Withers attack the nearest living target regardless of who’s attacking it, so they’ll keep it occupied for a while. The Chester soldiers will do most of the killing work, and if it survives to the end we can just encourage people to evacuate the area. This is a city - there will be more than enough mice and rats crawling around to occupy it until we can throw more Chester soldiers with swords at it.”

“It’ll completely destroy the wall,” Jacobs argues. “The tight exits are what makes them defensible - if that’s gone, Chester has an easy way to the rest of the city.”

“Not if there’s more withers to occupy them.” Techno shoves another batch of skulls from the ender chest into the sack in his hands. “Don’t worry about finding men able to build it close enough. I’ll do it myself.”

Jacobs blinks, long and slow. “You. Are. Fucking insane.”

Techno tightens the sack, now filled with skulls and soul sand, and dumps it back in the ender chest. Then he shrinks and picks the ender chest up, and turns towards the doorway.

“What I just told you was not a suggestion,” he says, steeling his voice. “It was a warning, so you can minimize Beastire casualties. I will kill a hundred thousand men, and then a hundred thousand more, and level all the world’s cities ten times over if it means my family will be safe.”

It is not a suggestion. It is a *promise*.

Techno unclips another speed potion from his belt and downs it in a few gulps. Then, he’s out the door before he can hear Jacob’s response.

*The Blood God is dead, and Technoblade sails across the ramparts.*

Wilbur and Tommy wouldn’t head for the walls - they know better than that. Phil had drilled them all in how cities can be attacked, and what to do in case of each instance. They know that’s where the majority of Chester soldiers are congregated.

But they’re not safe until either away from this place, or the threat of soldiers instructed to attack civilians are gone. The naval blockade means the former option is near impossible.

So that just leaves this one. Every second late is another second one or both of them could be bleeding out, collapsed among the dead and soon to join them.

The Technoblade of old would have flashed war strategies and wielded reputation to command soldiers like chess pieces, to maneuver decisive victory with another show of genius. Then he would have stalked the battlefield and taken dozens for the next kill count.

Withers would have been too easy. Fewer chances to fight, to plan. It wouldn’t have been as *fun* to the Blood God, and if it wasn’t fun to the Blood God, it shouldn’t be fun for any part of Techno. They were, after all, the same person with only a name’s difference between them.

Techno has no room for fun or spectacle. He does not care how many people must die tonight.

Withers are reserved for *family*, just like all his violence now is. Techno supposes that, in a way, the withers have *always* been reserved for family matters.

He only needs Tommy and Wilbur safe again.

No Chester soldiers have managed to climb onto the ramparts. 2 daggers thrown dispatch the Beastire soldiers moving to stop him - Techno doesn't have time to reason with them. 2 is a negligible enough number in his plans - and there will be no crying later.

His reserve of tears dried up a long time ago, even if the sorrow in his chest never faded.

It is past time for sorrow and mourning as well. He knows what he did - and he would do it again anyway.

Finally, the spot is reached. Techno keeps his hood up to hide the enchantment gleam, hair parted on either side of him, staying low.

Put down ender chest, take out sack, spread the soul sand in a *T* shape on the limestone, roll down 2 wither skulls. Keep one in hand. Shove sack back in ender chest, and ender chest back in satchel.

Techno tosses the final skull into its place. Then, he turns and runs for cover without bothering to see the wither build into existence - it's nothing he hasn't witnessed before, anyway.

And besides, he has another 5 of these to create within the hour.

~\*~

The harbors are a little trickier - Wilbur and Tommy might be around here, having not realized Chester brought their navy along. But they won't stay near the clusters of soldiers and ships once they know.

Techno dives until he's well below the clouds again - sure enough, the soldiers are still congregated. He sets fire to the dynamite in his hands with flint and steel - the entire wrapping is paper layers, burning bright and large enough to stay flame even as it whistles through a hundred of feet of air.

He fires a propulsion rocket and takes cover back in the clouds, just as yet another explosion rocks the city of Beastire to its foundation.

When he dives back down a few moments later, eyes wincing through the smoke, he sees at least a hundred dead bodies and many more wounded.

It works, then. He had been wondering - the idea of dropping explosives from the sky has existed among military strategists for a while, but the problem had always been that the fuse of fire is snuffed out by rapid air movement long before it even hits terminal velocity, and any fire large enough to withstand it would be impossible for any bird or any gliding aerial contraption to carry.

Techno worked on some ways to bypass the fuse restriction back in Pogtopia, with the idea that *he* would carry the explosives via elytra instead of birds, but he never had a chance to use the results during the final battle. When the first bombs had started raining on Beastire, he realized Chester had encountered and solved the same problem somehow.

Two can play that game, though.



Techno unties another bundle of the dynamite from his belt. A pity large objects are hard to hold while mid-air on the elytra - he'll have to land to restock from his ender chest after this one.

In the meanwhile, however, he has another few hundred soldiers to knock off Chester's forces. And then a few hundred more. Once the troops around here are thinned out, he'll move on to launching crossbow rockets at their navy - a bit of oil and more dry wrapping paper, and maybe he could set the ships on fire as well.

By then, news will have spread among soldiers to be wary, begin running, seek new orders. That'll make them less likely to waste time attacking civilians.

Jacobs better be quick with his recapture of the inner district. The sooner the place is secure, the sooner Techno can fly near ground level to search without being shot with arrows, and call for Tommy and Wilbur.

## Chapter End Notes

if i had a nickel for every time what was supposed to be 1 chapter in the outline morphs into 3 chapters, i would have... like 10 nickels *\*sobs\**

anyway techno is having a great time isnt he, totally not in the middle of a life crisis at all hahahah

## turns out i still can, but not for the same reasons as before

### Chapter Notes

there's a decent amount of blood this chapter. be warned.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“You really, really don’t need to do this,” Tommy says, edging to skirt around another bend with Wilbur right behind. If they find a way inside the building, it’ll be easier to defend from, and he’s decently sure he saw the door there was open.

“Sorry, young man,” the soldier says. “We’re under strict orders. Nothing personal.”

He advances with his sword, and the three others behind him follow suit.

At least Tommy hears the faint tapping of the steep-tipped cane fade behind him. That’s good. Even if he goes down here, at least Wilbur will have a chance to get away.

Tommy readies his hoes, and takes another few steps back until he’s at the doorway of the empty building. Thank fuck these people aren’t armed with projectile weapons.

The first soldier attacks without warning, tip aimed for the heart. Tommy knocks the sword aside just barely in time, and jams his hoe into the soldier’s head. Another quick thwack has him crumpling to the floor.

Blunt metal slams into Tommy’s shoulder, driving him down. He bites back a curse as he crashes into a table edge, skin tearing. That’ll bruise at least, if not outright open another cut, and the slash wound at his side is probably bleeding again - it’s certainly bitching with enough pain.

One of his hands is now trapped beneath a shelf of some kind, not that he can see much with most of his vision pinned to the mahogany floor.

Tommy coughs, breath spluttering as two of the soldiers slam their boots onto him - one his leg, and the other on his other hand. The hoe lies a little ways away, metal head just barely visible. He braces himself as the remaining soldier raises a sword above his neck.

Hopefully, they don’t search through his satchel and find the hidden Notch apple. Hopefully, Wilbur finds Techno and they both stay safe.

*Hopefully*, his dead body remains hidden and they confirm his death some other way. He really doesn’t want his family to see him like this.

A soft gurgling sound fills the air. Tommy blinks - and then widens his eyes when he realizes he *can* blink.

The soldier about to slice his head off abruptly collapses as a thin blade whips out of his heart with a thin stream of blood, and a minute later the hard crack of bone slams his ears.

The biting weight on his hand vanishes. Tommy flails his arm up and, with a few searing, scrabbling grips, manages to catch the falling sword before gravity itself stabs him. He heaves himself up to thrust it into the final soldier before there's time for reaction. It spears the soldier through the crotch, who then staggers back with a wide eyed look - another blade finishes him off with a clean slice through the neck.

When the soldier drops from his vision and Tommy manages to wriggle his other hand free from under the shelf, he whips around to find himself face to face with a shaking Wilbur.

Tucked beneath one arm is a crutch, made of wood and dark cloth straps. In his other hand, his cane is now a thin steel sword dripping with blood and bile.

"I forgot Techno added that," Tommy whispers as Wilbur quickly wipes it on one of the soldiers' leather arm guards.

"Was waiting to find another crutch before I unscrewed the lid off," Wilbur says, breath heavy. "It's a decent weapon, but I can't exactly support my weight on it."

Tommy manages to draw himself into a sitting position. His satchel is still slung over his arm - he undoes the clasp, trying and failing to keep the tremble of his fingers under control, and pulls out two potions - healing and regeneration.

"Are you hurt?" he asks Wilbur. Wilbur shakes his head, and half stumbles, half kneels down to Tommy's level. The sword-cane is set aside, and he draws out the same handkerchief as before.

Tommy hands him the healing potion, and manages to uncork and swallow the regeneration one in a few thick gulps. The liquid runs like molten lava down his throat, burning and bitter as ash.

"Where?" Wilbur asks as he shakes potion drops onto the cloth piece.

"Cuts on my left arm, when I fell down," Tommy mumbles through the dizziness. "Think the right shoulder's broken. The slice from earlier is open again. And-"

Through a few waves of racking arm tremors, he drops the sword in his right hand and gingerly uncurls his palm. It feels like the entire area is on fire, every cell of flesh dissolving into nothingness.

Wilbur sucks in a deep breath. The palm is a sea of blood, overflowing onto the floor like a miniature fountain. There's barely any visible skin.

"Had to catch that sword," Tommy mumbles, eyes half-lidded. He hadn't realized how much blood there would be, but he's seeing it now.

It's - that kind of injury on his hand. That's... that's not good. Hurts like a bitch too, now that the distracting thunder of adrenaline has subsided.

Wilbur is tearing cloth off one of the soldier's pants. He wipes the blood from the palm in one clear motion, and quickly pours the entire potion onto Tommy's hand.

The pain dulls a bit, though the feeling of his skin knitting is uncomfortably tight and itchy.

"Sorry," Wilbur says. "I'd normally be more careful with it, make sure there's just enough so the skin heals right, but we don't have time for that right now. We - we might have to recut and reheel it later, but the important thing is to make sure you're not bleeding right now."

He can't wield anything if his hand is out of commission. There's little to do for his shoulder, though, besides let the regeneration slowly work its way through.

"I know," Tommy says, hating how quiet his voice is right now. But it hurts to talk already, let alone project himself any louder.

Wilbur rifles through the satchel and pulls out another healing potion. Tommy supposes it's good he had packed so many - originally he'd worried he was overreacting, but from this experience he knows he'll never skimp on preparing for a journey again.

If he survives this, that is.

Wilbur gently guides Tommy to lean sideways, against the table leg, and peels back his blood-soaked shirt. The slash wound is bleeding again, like Tommy thought it would be, a dark line of red on pale pink canvas. Wilbur wipes the flowing blood away with another piece of cloth he'd torn off from somewhere, and runs the potion-soaked handkerchief lightly down the wound again.

"We're supposed to disinfect with alcohol first too," he sighs as the wound closes once more. "But I don't want you in more pain if we have to fight again."

"Techno can take care of the medical shit after we survive," Tommy says, trying to keep his breaths shallow. "It's probably *when* and not *if* we have to fight too, the bitches."

Wilbur glances around. "We could - this house is empty. We could try to hide here."

"But if this city gets overrun, we really are screwed sitting ducks," Tommy points out. "You were right - the Nether's our best option."

Wilbur curses softly, but manages to stand up with his hands supported by the table. He hooks an arm around the crutch, and picks the cane-sword back up. Tommy rises beside him, pushing aside the pain to stagger over and draw up his hoe as well - with his left hand instead of his right, since that shoulder is still broken and they don't exactly have the time to make a sling for it. The satchel is slung around his neck.

On account of how soldiers might come here any moment to kill them.

The outside looks too bright, too harsh to Tommy's eyes. A side effect of the potions - and being half delirious with pain despite being drugged up on potions, probably.

Hah, Wilbur managed to convert him to drugs after all. There's a reason people aren't supposed to put too many potions in their system, especially out on the battlefield - it's a delicate balance between being in too much pain to fight, and being too high on the drugs to fight.

Plus, overdose sometimes has the delightful side effect of death. That would require a good bit more for Tommy, since his body is already used to being hiked up on the stuff - but fuck. Nothing about this is good right now.

Wilbur catches him as he nearly sways back onto the ground. "Sorry, I - I couldn't leave your wounds bleeding out while we still have to be on the move. Once we're in a safe place, you're eating the Notch apple, okay?"

"mokay," Tommy says. He scrunches his eyes against the sunlight, and claws aside the slime of unconsciousness that's creeping over his skull. "I think I got some medical alcohol in my satchel too--"

Wilbur rams himself onto him. Tommy has time for a single blink - and then they're crashing onto stone.

He registers pain, flaring like a thousand rockets in his shoulder, and he registered raw, bloody screaming - and then he realizes they're connected-

And then a bundle of cloth is shoved into his throat, grimy and musk-oiled and tasting of copper. Tommy thrashes against the sudden, encompassing weight on his body-

"Stay still," Wilbur's voice snaps beside his ear, tight and hissing. "Be quiet."

That gets him to freeze.

Wilbur's breath stutters, breath warm and irregular against his face. Tommy can't see anything, can't focus on anything beside the still bursting pain in his shoulder and the ache of his palm and the way his organs feel like they've all been rearranged by an arrow-

The weight lifts off of him.

"I - I think they're..." a thud, as something hits the ground. "-gone..."

Tommy forces his eyes back open, and realizes the thing that had hit the ground was Wilbur, limbs sprawled. His crutch is still clasped beneath one hand, but the cane sword is nowhere to be seen.

Horror claws his throat open as he realizes why Wilbur had slammed himself over him.

There's an arrow in Wilbur's back. The feathered end is soft blue, like the color of the Antarctic banner. Blood splutters around the protrusion in jagged spurts.

"Wilbur," Tommy says. His voice doesn't sound like it's there - instead, it's as though his hearing and his mind are on separate levels of existence entirely. A new dimension created just for his denial and failure and mounting horror.

"Wilbur," he tries again, everything wavering. "Wilbur. Wil. Bur. Brother."

"Hi." Wilbur's head turns until his eyes, even screwed shut as they are, seem to pierce a hole through Tommy. "I - I'm here. I - ah. Sorry 'bout your shoulder. Had to make them think we were dead. And wait for them to leave."

Every word is wheezed out like a dying balloon. The arrow is deep, and the entrance wasn't clean. The blood mocks that much.

Tommy has no idea what it hit - but from the angle, it had to have hit *something* decently important. He probably can't leave it in too long - but he can't pull it out either.

They - they have to hide, until-

An explosion of gold throws Tommy back. His ears are ringing again.

He jerks himself back up, pushes through the fog of gold particle to see - sure enough, the bracelet around Wilbur's wrist is gone.

A bit more of the arrow's shaft is now visible. The totem's way of healing must have expelled it from - from whatever organ it had hit, to heal the organ completely.

“Tommy,” Wilbur mutters.

“Y - yeah?”

“Think i’s poi...poisoned.”

Tommy’s breath hitches. His cheeks burn, from blood and tears like fire.

No.

No - *they were so close.*

Totems only heal the immediate cause of death. That position - it had to be the stomach. That’s healed now, the arrow pushed out by the totem magic - but it just *had* to be poisoned too.

“Fel’ it ‘fore,” Wilbur rasps. He chokes out a strangled cry. “Cave spi’er...still there.”

He - if it’s cave spider poison - he’s - the arrow-

Cave spider poison, in a wound like this, with a tipped arrow - about 10 minutes. It’s been - how long? 3, 4, since everything fell apart?

But the arrow has to stay. Or the blood loss will...

There’s - there’s a procedure to this. He remembers. Theoretically, there’s - he has to remember. He has to - to-

Tommy’s fingers scrabble, faster than they ever have before. The gold wire of his wrist is ripped off and wound around Wilbur’s in an instant.

Then he unclasps his satchel’s flap and upends it. Everything inside is thrown against the pavement in a shower of glinting spectacle - coins, candies, glass bottles forged to withstand the blunt force - and a sharp knife, still wrapped in its sheath.

“Wilbur, stay awake,” Tommy whispers, taking one hand to force his jaw open. He grabs the strap of his satchel, crumples it between his brother’s teeth, slides the knife from its sheath and crawls until he’s hunched over the arrow wound.

His fingers sink through the blood pooled around it, feeling around until he reaches where the wood shaft meets skin - and then, he brings the knife down and slices the hole larger.

Wilbur’s muffled scream almost jolts Tommy’s hand away, but he forces himself to keep cutting even as the sobbing wails rise. More blood gushes around his hands, staining, foaming, like the ocean in a thunderstorm.

As soon as the hole is wide enough, the arrowhead loose enough, Tommy wrenches it out the shuddering body as quickly as he dares. The dark blood torrents into a tsunami, drowning everything in radius and continuing its march to conquer Wilbur’s body.

Tommy pulls away and tosses the soaked arrow somewhere far behind him with far more force than necessary, flinging red across his own cheek. Both his elbows are entirely caked with blood. More of Wilbur’s formerly white shirt is now dark than not - blood continues to stream down, into a moat around his now still figure.

Wilbur's sobs begin quieting.

"No!" Tommy grabs health potion from the mess around them, twists off the cork, and pours everything into the overflowing well of red. The liquids rise and spiral together - and begin clotting into a slime-like substance. "Wil - Wilbur, you have to stay awake. *Wil*."

Another blast of gold throws him to the ground. He's crawling back a moment later, with another healing potion in hand.

Cause of death - it has to be blood loss this time. No one can survive losing as much as Wilbur already has. Tommy uncorks and dumps the entire bottle of healing potion into the wound again.

More clotting. That's - that has to work. Totems manifest more blood from the empty air if there's not enough to replace it. The clotting will - has to - prevent enough from escaping. Even if it uses some.

"Tommy," Wilbur whispers.

"Don't," Tommy snaps back. He claws his fingers back inside his satchel and reaches the pocket where an apple enchanted by a god is nestled. "Don't say you're giving up. I'll never give up on you. You're not allowed to give up on yourself."

The pocket strap is torn in half. The apple rolls, slippery, between his fingers.

"I - I know." Wilbur's barely audible. "Wanna live. 'cause you want me."

"That's the spirit," Tommy whispers. He cradles one hand around Wilbur's chin, and coaxes his mouth open. With his other shuddering, pink-scarred palm, he yanks the satchel straps out from Wilbur's teeth and practically shoves the apple between in their stead. "Wil, eat. Please eat."

Wilbur's jaw twitches weakly, but finds no purchase against the shiny skin.

Tommy curses. He digs two dripping fingers into the apple's flesh and tears a chunk beneath his nails.

"Swallow," he says, flicking the tiny, blood-soaked scrapes onto Wilbur's tongue. Wilbur's mouth closes - and opens again. Empty.

He can only hope Wilbur did swallow. Rapidly, Tommy shaves more of the Notch apple's flesh into Wilbur's mouth. Blood stains the formerly pristine white flesh, but it shouldn't be enough to interfere with the healing.

"Keep swallowing," he says after a small pile has accumulated. This time it seems Wilbur manages easier - when his mouth opens again, nearly all the bits of apple are gone.

Tommy sets the remaining Notch apple, now with a bite-sized chunk scraped out, on his lap and uncorks a regeneration potion. Whatever organ that was damaged enough to kill Wilbur has been healed, but that doesn't mean nothing else was torn internally.

"Drink." He presses the edge against Wilbur's lips, and holds his other hand out to raise the head up. Wilbur manages a few small sips before jerking into a violent cough. Blood dribbles out the corner of his mouth.

"Keep drinking," Tommy says. There's nothing authoritative about his voice - only a shaking, whispering, desperate mess as he begs his brother to survive. "Wil, you have to - please keep

drinking.”

Wilbur takes a few more sips, and then a few more, and then a few more again - until eventually, the entire bottle has only a drop or two clinging to the glass walls.

Tommy lets it clatter to the ground, and brings the apple back to his lips. “Can you - can you chew and swallow?”

Wilbur manages a feeble shake of his head.

“That’s - uh - I’ll keep shredding it for you, okay?” Tommy’s nails begin scraping again. “You just need to swallow. That’s all.”

He doesn’t know how long it takes for Wilbur to eat the entire Notch apple. He can focus only on two things - the steady muttering of “*please eat, just eat, Wil, you’ll be fine,*” that gradually fuzzes into white noise in Tommy’s ears, and the erratic rise and fall of Wilbur’s chest that doesn’t seem to get any better no matter how much apple is consumed, or regeneration potion is sipped along with it.

The cores of Notch apples have healing properties too, and they lack seeds. Tommy scrapes and scrapes, until every last bit is gone.

“Are you - do you need more-”

“Migh’ die wi’ more pot’on,” Wilbur mumbles. “Fu-”

“Don’t strain yourself,” Tommy says. He crawls and slumps down the wall of a building, the same one they had stepped out of however long before, and eases Wilbur’s body until he’s laying stomach-down against Tommy’s chest. The arrow wound has stopped bleeding by now, a massive pink-red clot stoppering the hole.

But there’s still so much he *doesn’t know* about Wilbur’s injuries. Even potions and god-blessed apples can’t heal everything. Loose stomach acid could be eating away at all the progress they’ve clawed right now, and Tommy wouldn’t be able to do anything about it.

*Focus on what you can do*, he reminds himself.

“Any - anything else you need, Wil?”

“Everywhere hur’s. Sleepy.”

“No - no, don’t sleep-” Tommy presses a hand onto Wilbur’s cheek. “Stay awake, Wil. Stay awake for me.”

“rying,” Wilbur’s voice faints again. “Fo’ you...”

“Yeah, for me. I’d be very mad if you didn’t stay with me,” Tommy chokes out. Fuck, are the tears back? Why are they coming back now?

The pain in his shoulder is throbbing harsher too. Or maybe it was always like this, and he had been too distracted to notice. That’s a distinct possibility.

“Just stay awake until Techno gets here,” Tommy says. “And he can...”



Techno can get them bandages. Bandages, and fuck ton more knowledge about medicine than Tommy has. And he can bribe the city's best doctors too, assuming they haven't all been killed by now-

But that's assuming Techno *gets* here on time.

And Wilbur's breathing is slowly growing more erratic again.

Tommy draws his hand from Wilbur's face, and a bloody handprint is stamped on the skin in its place. He strains to reach for another regeneration potion, rolling on the dark, red-baked pavement.

It's pinched between two fingers, uncorked, and drawn to Wilbur's lips again.

"Come on," Tommy whispers. Wilbur has a higher tolerance for potions than most people, even if the risk of overdose is nearing. He's almost certainly also suffering an injury potions can't help much - there's more than a few of those an arrow wound may cause.

But the alternative is to let him slowly die in Tommy's arms, and Tommy would rather slit his own wrist to replenish the lost blood before he lets that happen.

## Chapter End Notes

tommy, that's a very unsanitary way of conducting blood transfusion

# line from the distance

## Chapter Notes

[discord](#) to get pings for updates/discuss stuff!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Beastire's First Wall has stood for a thousand years and a hundred sieges, has protected millions over the course of its lifetime.

Most of its length is now blackened rubble. The foundations shattered like obsidian glass, and those it was supposed to protect now lay withered and dying, or at the mercy of any assault.

This will be Techno's legacy - mass destruction for the sake of cold wars. Even if he never wields a blade again, he has already left in the world a new weapon. A new era of death.

L'Manberg had been a mere trial run, if this is his full spectacle.

And when one conducts a spectacle, all others will try to summit its maximum.

After the naval blockade is destroyed, and harbors secured, Techno flies back to Jacobs as quickly as he dares. By then, most of the withers are dead - as are the majority of Chester's forces.

A retreat order has been given for the rest. Whatever commanders planned this attack have recognized the exercise in futility pushing a continuation would be.

It'll take around half an hour for Beastire's troops to resecure the city. They have orders to kill any Chester soldiers they come across, and block Nether portal access.

Techno doesn't bother waiting that long.

~\*~

Despite his constant, varied glancing, Tommy hears the achingly familiar *whoosh* of an elytra landing before anything else.

*I taught him that*, he thinks numbly, before Techno's hands are prying his own away from where they join a desperate lock over Wilbur's back, as though the grip might prevent his life from escaping.

"What's wrong?" Techno asks, voice wound tighter than the pain in Tommy's shoulder. "Where's the injury?"

Tommy points to the mess of blood congealed around the wound.

"Arrow," he says. "He - died, but the totem went off, and then - arrow poisoned, so I cut it out. Died again - blood loss - but my totem was on him - his breathing's gotten *weaker*."

That's all Tommy can choke out before burying his face into Techno's cloak. He can't stop the sobbing that follows.

There's a shift, and a clicking sound - Tommy drags his face back out to see Techno swing his totem necklace over Wilbur's head.

Then, Wilbur is shuffled into Techno's arms. He coughs weakly at the new movement, but his face remains trapped in that pale, strained expression.

"Hospital's a 5 minute walk," Techno says. He glances Tommy up and down. "Can you make it?"

His expression is flat, held unnaturally still. Tommy can see the effort to remain calm practically popping veins in his already bloodshot eyes.

Despite everything, fondness blooms in Tommy's chest.

"Yeah," he says. "Lead - lead the way, big man."

~\*~

The hospital center, theoretically, prioritizes soldiers over civilians. In reality, when they arrive Techno sees at least 2 dozen non-combatants sprawled on the beds, cots, and other makeshift rest spots.

Thankfully, none of the bombs or fire had struck this place, or the 4 other hospitals in the inner district. Techno would have had to shell out even more bribes to the doctors and organizers, in that case.

He manages to secure treatment for Tommy and Wilbur in the same room, lined with square windows. On the bedside table between, twin white poppies bloom in a flower pot.

"Will Wilbur be okay?" Tommy asks as a nurse checks the security of his arm sling. His voice is tiny, not frail but still wired like it could break beneath the stress any moment.

Techno glances to the other bed, where Wilbur is surrounded by 3 doctors and another nurse. Tommy's injuries are simple enough to treat - a sling and more regeneration for his shoulder, as well as some bandages for his cuts - but Wilbur lays still with his breath barely audible. His eyes are closed.

"If he survives the next day, his chances of survival are boosted significantly," one of the doctors around him replies. He doesn't look up, the scalpel-like instrument in his hand still digging in the mass of viscous pink-red around the arrow wound.

"He has to live," Techno whispers quietly, still sitting beside Tommy on his bed. "He has us. He has Phil. He *can't* not live."

Tommy sighs, and turns to bury his head against Techno's shoulder.

"He better," he mutters, and Techno hates how he sounds even less certain than Techno does.

Beyond the blood loss and torn muscle, the doctors had also identified a section of intestine the arrow had scraped through. The Notch apple and regeneration initiated healing, but the risk of infection is still there. They can do little but clean the wound, bandage it tightly, and wait.

Wilbur had lost consciousness minutes after arriving at the hospital. By now he's deep in the realm of sleep - and Techno desperately hopes that is a good thing.

~\*~

“So, how much is he paying you?”

The doctor freezes, a hand still on Wilbur’s newest change of bandage.

“Excuse me?”

“How much is my brother paying you?” Tommy asks. “To prioritize us over everyone else. Pretty sure most people around here don’t get their own retinue of doctors constantly checking on them.”

“Why would you want to know?” the doctor asks. He draws away from Wilbur’s bed, apparently satisfied with the newest dressing. He turns his head until his expression is kept from Tommy’s sight.

“I’m bored,” Tommy says. “And also slightly curious about how easy Beastire is to bribe.”

“There’s an economic incentive to taking the deal,” the doctors says instead of answering. “The more money that is spent by people in the next few months, the more the economy will be jumpstarted, and the faster it will recover.”

Damn. He’s good.

“Doesn’t change the time and labor cost of rebuilding,” Tommy points out. “But anyway, how much did - uh, *Whitelisted* - pay you and your hospital? Has to be quite a bit.”

Calling Techno “Whitelisted” still feels a bit strange, even if that’s what everyone else around here knows him as.

With a small twinge of surprise, Tommy realizes he prefers calling him “my brother.” It sounds better.

It sounds... right.

Huh.

*Techno is my brother.* Tommy runs the sentence around his head. *He is my brother, and we love each other very much, and will do anything for each other.*

That - that sounds right. He’s not sure when that development happened, but the point of the matter is that it *did*.

The doctor, meanwhile, is making his way towards the door.

“He paid us enough,” he replies on his way out. “If you really wish to know, ask him.”

The door opens and closes with a click. Tommy is again left alone with an unconscious Wilbur, in a room of glossy wood walls and windows clear as the cloudless sky.

~\*~

“Tensions along Novixl’s east coast have been rising in the past 2 decades, or so Scott tells me,” Phil hums. The brush snags - he pulls away and flicks off more of Clementine’s thick, cotton-like curls.

“Chester and Beastire having been at each other’s throats for 2 centuries. Techno would love to study the political developments in more depth.”

Clementine thumps her tail.

“Buying more ships isn’t the only move Chester had made recently to match Beastire’s naval capacity. They’ll probably start having skirmishes again soon. First time since Beastire destroyed their navy at Caroline 30 years ago.”

Fucking gods, Clementine is shedding a *lot* of fur this week. Phil could stuff a pillow with all this fluff.

Actually, he *should*. A little welcome home present for Techno. Something for him to hold onto at night. Phil remembers he had loved his stuffed animals when he was young - but those had been left behind when the participation in wars started.

Knowing what he does now, though, he doubts Techno did so because he no longer found comfort in them.

Quite the opposite, in fact - just another thing he’ll have to work towards changing in the many upcoming years.

~\*~

Wilbur awakes, and is now awake.

He wishes he isn’t. Not for any suicidal reason, though he hopes to the fucking gods Tommy never hears that thought - it’s just that the healing process is far more painfully unpleasant when experienced while conscious.

He had been drifting into the darkness - the true darkness of death - when he heard Techno’s voice muttering above him. During the entire trip to the hospital and whatever subsequent operations had been performed on him, he had spent miring in on the lifeline.

Somewhere along the way he’d tripped back over to the *life* side of the territory, however.

Now that he’s mostly awake and aware of the soft fabrics around him, all the previous pain of his injuries which had been numbing now jab back into him like a million tiny, poison-tipped daggers.

Ugh, fuck. Tommy had to deal with all that, didn’t he?

Wilbur would really like to fuck right back off to sleep right now, but he’d rather talk with his brothers as soon as possible. Tommy, to apologize for putting him through... all that - his memory’s a little fuzzy, but he remembers enough to know everything Tommy had done. The totems, the potions, the... blood.

So much blood.

Oh, fuck - he hopes Tommy’s alright. Wilbur had heard his voice when Techno arrived - surely that means Tommy’s alright?

And he has to talk to Techno too, because if there’s anyone who would be completely freaking out right now, it’s Techno, and Wilbur needs to calm him down before Tommy tries to pin the job on himself again.

He tries to open his eyes. His eyelids twitch, slightly.

Oh, great.

He tries to say something. His throat promptly feels like it's been set on fire again.

Oh, *great*.

Then, Wilbur realizes there are voices around him.

"...everyone is asking me questions, Whitelisted, I'm not sure how you expect me-"

"I told you, I'm not leaving my brothers, so you can either get better at explaining or send them to me."

"I'm rather sure that'll just make things worse. And I know you'll chase out anyone who even looks at your brothers funny."

"I - look, I'll try my best to diffuse the situation. Deal?"

"You really are fucking insane."

"I won Beastire back with far less casualties than what would have happened otherwise, and you know - Wil!"

A warm hand rests on his cheek. Wilbur, finally, manages to twitch his eyelids open.

"Hello," he croaks.

"Wilbur, are you-" Techno's face swims into his vision like a heatcloud. "Are you..."

"I'm alive," Wilbur says. With far more effort than what it should require, he raises a corner of his mouth into a smile.

Techno slumps. "I'm sorry-"

"Tommy," Wilbur whispers. "Is he-"

"Tommy will be fine," Techno says. "He survived, just like you."

"I technically didn't *survive*." His head still feels like its looping circles around death, in fact.

"Let's not make it a habit." Techno frowns. "Do you need..."

"Are you okay?" Wilbur mumbles.

"What? Oh, I-"

"...s not your fault," he says.

"I - okay. Right. It's none of our faults."

Wilbur tries to nod, and when he finds he can't, settles for a sigh.

"Wanna sleep," Wilbur mumbles, letting himself relax back into the mattress below with closed eyes. Now that he has confirmation Tommy is fine, he'd love to just dream until all the pain has dulled into

something that doesn't make him constantly feel like shit. This talking thing is a lot harder than he anticipated - his throat already feels like it's been torn again, and the sear of his lungs don't help.

He probably can't get away with sleeping until it's all dulled away. But another few hours would be nice too.

"Right, right." Techno's hand cards through his hair.

"Go do your thing," Wilbur murmurs. "I won't run away."

"Uh - thing?"

"Thing you're procrastinating on. With the city."

That's the general gist of what Wilbur got from that conversation, anyway.

"Yes, Whitelisted," the other voice clips. "Listen to your brother. Resolve this mess you've created."

There's a long sigh, dripping with classic Techno dread. Fingers comb down Wilbur's hair one last time - fuck, that feels nice. Maybe he shouldn't have sent Techno off so soon.

The warmth parts away, imprinting only a fuzzy feeling behind.

"If anything happens to them, you know who's head it's on," Techno says, voice growing fainter.

And then, there's the click of a closing door. Wilbur lets himself drift back into sleep.

~\*~

"Finally, you decide to show up."

Beastire is ruled not by any single man or woman, but instead a council of officials voted into power by its many guilds. Right now, however, there is little question who represents the current rotation of decision-makers.

"I had other matters to take care of first, as your men did as well," Techno replies. He tries to stray from his usual monotone - that tone of voice, though usually how he naturally sounds, is too close to Technoblade the Blood God to be flaunting around the public in the immediate aftermath of a military conflict.

Instead, he mimics Wilbur's wavy words, always so full of life and intent. Techno's sure he's not even half-way there, but even that bit of distance should be enough to sever connection.

"Now that your *matters* are supposedly settled-" Jimmy Beast lets the quill he had been scribbling with fall back onto the parchment, "-care to give your version of the events? Jacobs has given his perspective, of course, but I want to hear it from Whitelisted himself."

Recap, and keep it as simple as possible. It's practically Techno's job.

"Chester was threatening my brothers by attacking Beastire," he says. "I employed the most efficient method of securing their safety."

"Which involved setting 6 withers on our First Wall."

"You can rebuild your walls," Techno says flatly. "I cannot rebuild my brothers."

“And what of the civilian casualties you caused?”

Techno clears the space between them in 3 long strides, and throws a Nether star onto Beast’s table so hard it dents a dark, sizzling hole in the wood. He draws his eyes down, ever so slightly.

“You don’t need to dance this around me,” Techno says. “I saw the aftermath of the withers. I saw Jacobs’ casualty estimates. If I had let Beastire’s soldiers defend against Chester normally, not only would there have been little guarantee in any side winning, the casualty rates would have been far higher than what it turned out to be.”

“At the cost of nearly our entire First Wall,” Beast repeats. “Which has been with us for nearly a millennium.”

Techno scowls. He remembers, very vividly, why he hates this part of wars so much. “I have no attachment to your wall. But consider it an opportunity to give more jobs to your citizens.”

Beast sighs, and eyes the Nether star still smoking on his desk. “Are you going to ask for these Nether stars back?”

“Keep them. I don’t care.”

His original Nether star should still be with the publishing house. And besides - Techno had been lying when he said he has 2 dozen wither skulls.

He has at least a hundred. They won’t be short on Nether stars to sell to cities.

“I must return to my brothers now, so here’s how I propose this,” Techno begins. “Officially, Whitelisted had nothing to do with Chester’s attack. I don’t care how you spin the story - just spin one that doesn’t involve me or my brothers. I will continue the book deal negotiation with the Karl Jacobs Publishing House. My brothers will continue to have the service of your city’s best doctors until they are healed, after which we will return home. Beastire gets to keep any Nether stars that turn up. Deal?”

Jimmy Beast stares into the Nether star for a long, long moment, and then meets Techno’s eyes for a moment more.

“Deal,” he finally says, “with one addition.”

Techno tenses.

An almost *nervous* look flashes down Beast’s expression, before he ducks his head beneath his table and resurfaces with a stack of books. He thumps them down beside the Nether star.

“You, ah - autograph these copies of your books for me.”

## Chapter End Notes

i know i originally said i would finish this fic today but in my defense this chapter and the chapter's that'll come later was originally supposed to be the final chapters. the outline just kept growing. i meant to finish this fic at around 200k words flat.



that is definitely not happening lmao.

i reply to comments live! [twitch](#)

[tumblr](#) and [twitter](#) for questions and art!)

## when the bells toll, the sky falls

The next time Wilbur wakes, it is to a weight heavy and inert at his side.

He opens his eyes, and stares into Tommy's.

"Hello," Tommy whispers, for some reason lying parallel with him on his bed. His hair is a whirlwind mess, a stray tuft tickling Wilbur's eyebrow.

"Hi," Wilbur croaks back.

"How are you feeling?"

Wilbur takes a second to consider the question.

"Like shit, to be honest."

Tommy giggles, for a moment looking 6 years younger - and then, he reaches a hand out to press around Wilbur's cheek.

"That makes 3 of us," he says.

3 of them...

"Where's Techno?"

"He's sending a pigeon to Phil." Tommy makes a pained face. "I mean, he's not gonna say anything in detail, because neither of us want to explain your injuries over text. It's just to let him know we'll be a week or 2 late in getting home."

"Oh, fuck," is all Wilbur manages.

"That's about right."

How the *fuck* is he supposed to explain to Phil that the moment they left his side, he got stabbed and almost died again? Will Phil ever trust them to leave his side?

Wait - he has to *let* them, at the very least. That's not his choice. But *still*.

They were the ones who insisted he stay home. They were supposed to show they could handle themselves without giving him a panic attack.

"Fuck, he'll kill me himself," Wilbur groans.

The tight feeling in his chest flares in pain again, snapping an additional hiss from him. Tommy frowns.

"Less talking, more resting," he says. "I know you just *love* the sound of your own voice, but I swear if you tear anything-"

"Yeah, yeah," Wilbur grumbles. He turns his head back into the embracing comfort of his pillow, and closes his eyes. Sleep tugs at his mind once more.

He hears the room's door click open just before sleep overtakes him.

~\*~

Tommy is still beside him when he wakes up, eyes closed and body faintly breathing in an even, peaceful pattern. Wilbur considers his still present presence strange at first, until he realizes Tommy had probably gone back to his own bed at some point in between.

His entire body feels... marginally better. Still like someone has torn a screwdriver through it - in a way, that *is* what happened - but the cramping pain has dulled into a deeply set ache he has a feeling he'll be carrying inside for a while.

Something golden and round and very, very shiny presses against his mouth.

"Eat," Techno says, peering down at him. He's seated on the other side of Wilbur's bed, a small stack of paper in his lap.

Wilbur closes his eyes for a moment. When he opens them again, the Notch apple doesn't go away and replace itself with something less... valuable.

"Eat that?" he asks.

"Yes."

"But - but I've-" he frowns. They've used nearly half a dozen apples on him by now. Phil is well traveled and so is Techno, but Notch apples were rare when they first fell to the world and they become rarer by the day - obviously, as Wilbur keeps eating them.

He should probably stop getting injured.

"Can't use them if you're dead," Techno says. His tone invites no argument.

"I'm healing," Wilbur protests.

"This will heal you faster. And better."

"But I don't - our supply."

"What about it?"

"I can't - I don't want to keep using up all our valuable stuff," Wilbur finally mumbles. "Let's save it for when-"

"-for when you get stabbed in the stomach with an arrow again?"

Wilbur winces. "I mean - well - I've already used up 2 totems and a lot of Notch apples-"

"You're eating this one too," Tommy's voice breaks through. "No arguments. You're outvoted."

Well, he can certainly see *that*. Wilbur sighs, and takes a bite into the Notch apple.

Ugh. That acrid taste is back in his mouth again.

Techno doesn't stop pressing until he finishes all of it - including the core, just like the last few times.

“Sorry,” Wilbur sighs as Techno wipes his hands on the side of his lap.

“Why?”

Wilbur stares. “I keep using all our stuff.”

“It’s meant to be used some day.” Techno shrugs. “If not to keep you alive, then what else? You still had a chance of infection, so the apple will speed your recovery along to the point where infection is far less likely - and it’s done that.”

Wilbur’s body feels overall worse, actually, like all his insides have been sunk in swamp water, but he knows from experience that’s the effect of the apple healing so much of his internal injuries over a short period of time.

A healthy person would obtain all the normal boosts of the apple - resistance, regeneration - increased strength, speed, and senses - but using them to treat injuries is the most common application.

Not that anything about a Notch apple is common. Wilbur just ate an entire mansion’s worth of money right there.

“Don’t be sorry,” Tommy says, taking one of Wilbur’s hands in his and clutching it to his chest like a lifeline. “It’s pretty obvious we’d much rather have you than some enchanted apples.”

“Yeah,” Wilbur breathes.

He doesn’t doubt *that*. But he does get critically injured at a rate far higher than what’s probably normal.

“And you got hit protecting me,” Tommy pressed. “I saw you move to block the arrow.”

Wilbur winces. He’d seen the soldier nock the arrow towards Tommy’s heart, had had that precious second to throw himself in front instead. He’d done it - of course he had, and he absolutely would again - but the fact that they weren’t able to dodge completely...

They’re so fragile. All of them, in the end.

“How long do you think Phil will ground us?” Wilbur asks.

Techno snorts. “He won’t say he’s going to. But we’re not leaving his side for the next 5 years.”

Wilbur allows himself a soft yawn. That’s perfectly fine, in his opinion. He’s already decided he’s content with lazing out the rest of his life in their house on the mountainside, barring any excursions Tommy or Techno may want to go on.

“But really though,” Tommy says. “We were - this was supposed to be a small trip to get Techno’s book deal. And then it all went to - to *this*. ”

He sounds rather upset at the entire - well, *everything*. Wilbur can’t blame him.

“Sometimes these things just can’t be helped,” Techno says quietly. “It was pure luck the invasion started during the only stretch of time we weren’t together.”

“Should we - well, we can’t keep elytras and massive amounts of supplies with us all the time.” Wilbur breaks off, trying to think of a balance.

“No.” Techno frowns. “I should have been there-”

“Oh, not this self-deprecating shit again,” Tommy growls. “Stop it. None of that. It was bad enough hearing Wilbur go through it again. Sometimes luck is just a bitch, okay?”

“Men will always judge the quality of action and not the whims of the universe,” Wilbur murmurs. That’s a quote from one of Techno’s books, actually, though he doesn’t remember which one.

“Men are usually wrong,” Tommy snaps. “What of it?”

Techno traces a circle onto the bed sheet. “We’ll be more prepared next time.”

“We should all carry an ender chest with us, for one,” Wilbur says. “They’re a massive fucking pain to make, but Phil will be throwing them at us after we bring it up.”

“We should carry medical supplies with us anyway,” Techno adds. “Bandages, cleansing alcohol, potions - maybe a slice or two of Notch apple, since they don’t spoil. Weapons too.”

“We could ask Phil to make you and Wilbur cloaks like the one I have.” Tommy perks up. “That would be fucking cool.”

“It would,” Wilbur agrees. “It has protection enchantments on it, right?”

“Yeah.” Techno looks down, briefly. “If you had been able to wear it-”

“There were a lot of ways this could have gone, *if only*,” Tommy says.

Wilbur peers closer at Techno, at the slumped shoulders and hair strewn haphazardly around them. His eyes are that of tiredness and resignation.

“You don’t need to take this as an omen,” Wilbur says, nudging his side with a weakly raised finger. “This doesn’t mean you’re always bound to blood or fighting or whatever.”

“I know,” Techno sighs. “But it’s - it feels awful, actually. I basically guaranteed Beastire’s victory in that, but - it was all about you guys, you know? I care about Beastire’s historical and cultural value, and I don’t want more casualties than necessary - but I still *did* all that. With the withers.”

“You did it because you care about us, though,” Wilbur points out. “It’s so different from...”

From *before*, not that *before* has much of a definition, the line blurred by a thousand windswept rainfalls. But that’s the point - that the distinction can be made in the first place.

“Yeah,” Techno murmurs. “I mean - everyone’s definitely going to start using withers and aerial bomb strikes now. That’s - hah. I don’t think I could top that.”

“The bombs are Chester’s legacy,” Tommy says. “And they came up with a different design than you. The withers-”

He makes another face, curling into Wilbur’s side. “People were going to begin using it eventually. You just... sped along the process.”

“We’ll stay far away from any wither fights,” Wilbur adds, reaching to clasp one of Techno’s hands in his. “No more conflict if we can help it.”

Techno drops his head into his other hand. Pink hair spills onto Wilbur's shoulder.

"I was so close to losing you again," he mutters. "I - I can't-"

"We talked about this, remember?" Wilbur says. His chest knots again, and probably not from his injury. Fuck, this can't be good for his circulation - but Techno needs the words. "You tried your best, and even if I died it wouldn't have been your fault. We'll just - we just have to deal with it."

"Yeah," Tommy exhales. "Hard as that is. You can't wallow in self-pity forever."

"I know," Techno whispers. He wipes his shaking hand down his face, and takes a deep breath. "Yeah. Let's - I understand. It's just - uh. Hard to - to process."

"To feel like it's right," Wilbur says. "Even if you know it is."

"Yeah. That."

And Wilbur knows that feeling all too well - knowing that he's wanted, that he's worth the effort, that he *can* and *should* make something better of himself. He thinks he's mostly succeeded, by now, even if "make something better of himself" usually involves watering flowers and watching ants all day.

Hopefully, with enough time, Techno recovers the same.

~\*~

Even with the apple eaten and the best medical care that could have been provided - Beastire's hospitals are almost *legendary* as a center of medical innovation - time is the ultimate healer of wounds. It is a week and a half later that Wilbur is cleared to leave his bed, though not for walking.

"I haven't seen that wheelchair design before," Wilbur says as Techno wheels it into the room. Instead of the wood chairs on wheels he's used to, this one has thick steel wheels and axles, and the body is fitted together from dark oak and a pale, glimmery metal.

"You also haven't seen many wheelchair designs in general," Tommy points out.

Wilbur sighs, rolls his eyes, and lets Techno lower him onto the cushioned seat. He misses his cane already.

Speaking of which-

"Is my cane lost?" he asks. It has to be, right? The sword part and its covering had been thrown aside on the streets somewhere. A random person has to have snatched it up by now.

Wilbur's kind of sad now. He had gotten a bit attached to the thing.

"I found it, actually," Techno says. He digs through the satchel slung around his shoulder, and produces the cane - fully intact, covering and all. "The lid to the sword took a bit of searching, but it's undamaged."

"Oh. Thanks," Wilbur says. Of course Techno would think to look again soon after. "Uh - I'm not really using it right now, so how about you hang onto it?"

"Right." It's slipped back into the satchel.

“The sword part really came in handy, by the way,” Wilbur adds.

“Wilbur killed some soldiers with it,” Tommy says. “And also got blood on me.”

“Tommy, they were about to kill you. That was the least of my worries.”

“Least of mine too, but I was kinda panicking back there.” Tommy stretches his arms, and rises off his bed. The cuts and bruises on him have healed nicely by now, Wilbur knows. His shoulder is the only remainder of the attack, still hung from a loose sling.

“Alright,” Techno says. “Wilbur, I imagine you’d like to see something that’s not this room.”

Wilbur snorts. “I’d love to, Techno. If I have to stare at those white poppies one more second I’ll fucking eat them.”

“One drug overdose is enough for now,” Tommy chides. He saunters over to them easily enough, but stops to wrap and squeeze his hands around one of Wilbur’s.

Wilbur squeezes back.

“Right,” Techno coughs. “Let’s - uh, get Wilbur his fresh air.”

~\*~

“There isn’t as much damage as I thought there would be,” Wilbur notes.

“No. The bombs were only dropped on the inner district, and almost everything around here is made of stone.” Techno pauses. “I think the only important place that was hit was the sports stadium.”

Wilbur chuckles. “Not a terrible loss, then.”

“No.”

It’s a beautiful day, too. Clear skies, with the occasional pigeon flying overcast. Carriages trod down newly cracked streets, but everyone around walks with only the occasional trace of cautiousness.

“Almost feels like the first day,” Wilbur comments.

“It’s been almost 2 weeks.” Tommy shrugs. “Shocking, how fast people can get used to a new normal.”

“Yeah,” Wilbur says. New normal, indeed.

At least the doctors say he’ll be off the wheelchair within another week - though, in reality, that week will be spent not on a wheelchair but instead swathed in blankets on *The Camarvan*. They’ve already agreed they can’t put off returning to Sanctuary any longer, and so will board the ship the day after tomorrow.

“They’ve rebuilt the wall’s framework,” Techno notes. Wilbur hums along - a wooden framework of what is arguably Beastire’s oldest structure towers through the skyline, a reminder of its determined eternity. Given how important it is to the people of the city, they’ll probably have it rebuilt and even stronger within the end of the decade.

Not that it'll give them much protection from the newest military technologies. But Wilbur knows better than most the power of symbolism.

"By the way," Tommy pipes up. "I saw a stand selling pieces of fried fish and chicken earlier. They had this really delicious sauce to go along with it."

"I *am* rather hungry myself," Wilbur says. He can appreciate the gesture for what it is - clawing back their peace and chance at a normal life, one step at a time.

"Lead the way," Techno says simply. Tommy grins and nods - and then, they're off again. This time, among streets of flowing, chattering people and beneath a blue summer sky, the world bright and rebuilding before their eyes.

~\*~

There is, of course, one last thing to take care of before they must leave.

"How," Preston sighs, "in the worlds did you survive?"

Everyone else in the lobby room hold similar levels of shock. Someone chokes on their glass of water.

Beast kept his word, then. News of any involvement from Whitelisted has been kept quiet. No one has shown indication of linking him to any other public identity either.

"I had my ways," Techno shrugs. He resists the urge to pull his scarf up further - if he did that, it'll end up covering his eyes.

His fingers itch nonetheless, however.

"Right. You have your... ways."

"So," Techno says. This is, apparently, the kind of absolutely riveting conversation Tommy and Wilbur swear up and down they have when they commit to this *social interaction* thing.

Well, actually, that description would be doing Jocelyn a massive disservice. But she was an exception, not the norm.

"I presume you still want the book deal?" Preston asks slowly.

"If there's no trouble, yes."

One of the other managers nods, eyes fixed on Techno's figure and apparent survival. "None of our building, equipment or personnel were hit, so we can manage the deal under the same conditions we had worked out."

Techno hums. "Sounds good."

They crowd together in a meeting room again. The agreement is finalized and signed. The book will have a small marketing hype during the 2 or 3 weeks it'll take to gather everything together for mass printing - and then, they'll begin selling.

And with that, the objective he has come to Beastire for in the first place is complete.

~\*~



There is no place like home, or so the adage goes.

Phil, though, thinks many people don't realize what *home* means. Then again, most people never leave their homes in their lifetime. They have no reason to experience, to feel the pain of separation like a life-string cut short with jagged edges.

To Phil, home was once towering spires and lush hidden gardens. The work of a century spanning territory vast and still wrangled in the wilderness.

Home has not been a fixed place since Wilbur first stumbled into his life all those years ago, however.

Now, he sits upon the bench on the dock, over the harbor of Sanctuary, just like last time.

Unlike last time, however, he is alone.

Unlike last time, however, there is a letter clutched - nearly crushed - in his hand.

*Phil,*

*I'm decently sure Sanctuary has received news of some kind of attack on Beastire by now. You're probably worried if you've heard it.*

*Actually, you're definitely worried. That's fair.*

*Anyway, I'm sure you're also really eager to hear about how we're all safe and sound, and I'd like to preface this by saying we are, in fact, all safe and sound right now.*

*Chester attacked Beastire as I was in the publishing house, with Tommy and Wilbur together a block away outside. I don't want to say too much now, but Wilbur did sustain some injuries protecting Tommy, who also acquired some more minor injuries.*

*I wouldn't send something like this to you if I wasn't sure we'd all be fine, though. Tommy's shoulder is a bit busted, and Wilbur will still be rather weak by the time we return, but all three of us are alive and none of the injuries will be lasting, thankfully.*

*By our original calendar, we would have been a day or two from returning by now, if my calculation of the pigeon flight patterns are correct, we will be delayed by 2 weeks, however, because Wilbur needs the bedrest.*

*We'll see you soon.*

*Your son,*

*Techno*

When was the last time Techno had fully acknowledged aloud that he is Phil's son?

It is something all his boys had eventually turned an aversion to. Phil doesn't blame them, but in the past few months both Tommy and Wilbur have started semi-regularly referring to him as "Dadza."

He had thought Techno's wounds cut too deep to do the same.

Phil has a tendency of underestimating his children. He'll try his best not to make this mistake again.

He waits on the bench by the harbor, taking breaks by flying over the waves once in a while, while Clementine has her fun on the beach.

He waits until nighttime claims the sky, and continues waiting a while longer, before the darkness of sleep finally urges him to take an already dozing Clementine in his arms and return to their house and bed.

*The Camarvan* did not peak over the horizon today. That's alright - it's still another 4 days until the projected time.

Phil will fly back to the harbor tomorrow, awaiting the return of home.

# open to the sun and stars above

## Chapter Notes

[discord](#) to get pings for updates/discuss stuff!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“You don’t seem surprised,” Tommy says as Phil gently trails a finger down the bandages around Wilbur’s waist.

“I know how to read between the lines,” he responds. “The only reason Techno would have been so vague is if something major like this had happened.”

The bandages don’t need changing or securing, for now. He sighs, pulling back and tucking Wilbur’s shirt down. A stray seagull gives them a judgemental glare, which he ignores because he really, really doesn’t have time for judgmental seagulls right now.

“We’ll work this out,” Phil says finally. “Wilbur is barred from crop watering duty.”

“But that’s *all* I do!”

“You do a lot of other stuff,” Tommy says. “Stuff we enjoy. You don’t have to be useful just by accomplishing labor.”

“You don’t have to be useful, *period*,” Techno says. “Also, this will go by much easier if you take it easy in the first place and let the injury completely heal up.”

Wilbur makes a vague grumbling noise, but nods in a way that Phil knows is understanding. He feels his feathers relax ever so slightly, in a thousand tiny pinpricks.

That’s good. He’ll need all the wing control he can, to fly Wilbur back up to their house without jostling anything that absolutely *should not* be jostled.

~\*~

“So,” Tommy says conversationally.

“Welcome back,” Phil replies. His wings keep their curl around Wilbur, whose fingers are tapping the table in a nervous sounding *1-2* pattern.

“Yeah,” Tommy coughs. “Uh - very glad to be back.”

“I imagine.”

“You don’t need to sound so much like a disappointed parent,” Wilbur mumbles. “We had an agreement.”

“I’m not disappointed,” Phil says. “In any of you, at the very least.”

Techno frowns, hunching back. "None of us could have predicted that. It's not your fault."

"I know. I also know that if I had *been* there--"

Phil cuts that thought off before it manifests into words. He wrings his head down, tries to keep his breathing even. He mostly succeeds.

Fuck. Fuck, none of this is - *he just doesn't know*.

What *could* he have done? They had said, of course, that they would respect each other's wishes, and that they shouldn't beat themselves over not being around the others if they had all agreed beforehand. But-

But the truth of the matter is that it is very, very easy to die. To be killed. To succumb to any number of things - disease, destruction, everything in between. Phil has seen it with his own eyes - how quickly, and *unexpectedly* so many people fall into the void of death.

In many other timelines, Wilbur died that day in Beastire.

And Phil would have been faced with the news that his son, after everything they had survived, was felled by a single poison-tipped arrow. Causally, just like that. On a trip hundreds of miles south.

Would he have read the words in a letter, so similar to the one he had actually received, and spent a dozen days failing to comprehend them while awaiting Techno and Tommy's agonizingly slow return? Or would they have told him themselves, Techno looking Phil in the eyes and with trembling, grief-choked whispers, passed upon him the news of Wilbur's death? That he had died under Techno's watch and protection, even if they had all agreed no one was under anyone else's jurisdiction, and Phil would have been faced with 2 guilt-ridden sons while - while-

He has no idea.

This time, Wilbur survived. They all did. This is not a guarantee for next time.

Phil has lived 2000 years. He has had friends - close friends, even - and felt their passing.

He has never experienced anything near what would be the loss of his sons.

"Sometimes, we'll just have to be apart," Tommy mutters. "Can't be helped."

"I know," Phil says simply. And sometimes, even if they *are* all together-

That is not a guarantee either.

"I think - I think we should deal with it as it comes," Wilbur says quietly. "We can prepare and plan all we like, but sometimes things just... happen."

"That's true," Phil says simply again, mouth feeling numb. There are few things he understands in as intimately as that fact - the fact that sometimes, no matter how hard someone tries-

It's not enough.

Wilbur has stopped his tapping. The table beneath Phil's elbows is cold, flat.

"That's our reality, then," Techno sighs, straightening his back.

Phil nods, mutely, and turns to gently wrap his arms around Wilbur again. He closes his eyes and savors the moment, savors his son warm and safe in his arms.

Then he lets go, and slowly stands up.

“I’ll start working on those new ender chests.”

~\*~

Phil can’t change the fact that Chester invaded Beastire and in the process Wilbur received an arrow wound which nearly killed him, but he *can* help recovery in the aftermath.

Tommy and Techno are more than happy to work along, and even Clementine has developed a 6th sense for the rule that Wilbur should be avoiding all even remotely strenuous activity right now.

“This is like last time all over again,” Wilbur grumbles as Techno gingerly pries the teapot from his hands. “I can pour a cup of tea by myself.”

“Your hands still shake sometimes,” Techno begins listing off. “Water is dense and heavy. This tea is also very, very hot. Burns are dangerous, as are glass shards.”

Wilbur sighs, and rolls his eyes, but doesn’t protest as Techno pours the tea for him.

“It’s been 2 weeks since we got back,” he says. “I feel like I’ve downed a fucking barrel of regen by now.”

“Your body *does* respond unusually well to drugs,” Techno says. “Good to have confirmation.”

Phil hides a snort from his place at the kitchen counter.

~\*~

“You can watch the ants from a chair,” Techno says.

“Then you guys would get all huffy about me partaking in the horrendously laborious activity of dragging out a chair,” Wilbur points out.

Techno considers this for a moment.

“I can get you a chair.”

“...oh. I - I forgot that was an option.”

~\*~

“We could - we could stop if you want,” Tommy says, dropping onto the couch beside him.

“It’s alright,” Wilbur hums. He jolts down another progression of chords in the notebook - should he end the phrase with a major or dominant 7th?

It’s probably a decision to reconsider once the rest of this piece is planned out. He marks a question mark beside it for now.

“But we’re - I want you to know we don’t think you’re helpless.”

“I founded a country, led 2 wars, blew up said country, and somehow managed to survive.” Wilbur begins marking the roots of the next phrase down. “I think I know I’m not helpless.”

His hand stops, briefly, and he turns to meet Tommy’s eyes with a rueful smile. “I always fancied my strength to be in my words. And I don’t think that’s changed, even if I haven’t used that strength much lately.”

“It’s been a long while since you’ve talked circles around someone,” Tommy admits. He leans his head against Wilbur’s shoulder. “I - I don’t know whether I miss it or not. On one hand, manipulating politics and convincing people to your stories really fucked with your mental health. But...”

“But it feels like old times,” Wilbur finishes after a few lingering seconds. He looks back down at his notebook, and with a soft sigh, closes it. “It was simpler back then. And we were happy enough.”

“We’re stronger now, though,” Tommy says. “We also didn’t understand a lot of things back then.”

“That’s true.”

If Wilbur could, he would absolutely take them back to that simpler time. Before Pogtopia and the rebellion, before the politics, before the wars - before L’Manberg.

Before they ever thought leaving home was ever a good idea.

Those few years with Phil, Techno, and Tommy, all living together as a family - those had been the happiest years of Wilbur’s life. He had everything he should ever have wanted - whatever wealth could buy him, a loving family that he loved in turn, safety under the protection of their father’s wings, and a relatively untroubled mind.

It was more than almost anyone else in the world has. It was, to put it frankly, an incredibly enviable position.

And Wilbur had not only been foolish enough to throw it all away, but also drag Tommy along with him.

He can’t deny, however, that they’ve come out of their experiences stronger. More learned. More wary.

There’s also the point that they could have just as easily come out of those experiences dead, but they didn’t - in this reality, luck had carried them to the safety of here.

And they all know better than to tempt that luck again. If not for their own sakes, then for the pain it would cause their family. They’ve worked too hard for this peace, clawed too determinedly out of the ensnaring pits that are their pasts, to throw it away again.

None of this newfound understanding is worth what they’ve gone through. But it is something, and it has changed them, and Wilbur knows to acknowledge that.

“You did that thing again,” Tommy suddenly says.

“What thing?”

“That thing where you...” he makes motions that appear like one hand trying to play at shadow puppets while the other dances confusedly. “Where you deflect to something else to avoid the original topic.”

Wilbur blinks, slowly. He had been doing that?

Tommy had begun this by saying he wanted Wilbur to know that they didn't consider him weak. Wilbur had responded with...

"Oh, right," he says. "I did do that. Sorry, I - I didn't mean to."

It's a bit of a habit he developed back during the presidency - eventually, he got so used to deflecting that his conscious mind stopped processing the action and just started performing it without analysis.

He's shed a lot of that old skin - not too much, though. Not nearly enough. Wilbur imagines that'll take a few more years, or decades - or maybe even never. Maybe certain traits of his are baked into him just as deeply as Phil's desire for an open void are into him.

He'll definitely have to keep an ear on what he finds himself saying, then.

"I do know you guys mean the best for me," Wilbur says. "And I really don't mind that much - I know some other people would find it frustrating or demeaning, and they would be in their right to protest it - but I'm not going to."

"We treat you like you're made of glass sometimes," Tommy says quietly. "It was the case back when you - after you threw yourself off that cliff too. I thought you might resent the treatment."

"My body's probably more fragile than glass right now," Wilbur points out. "Internal organ damage is no joke. I know you guys are doing it out of a genuine concern and desire to see me recover, and I'm more than happy to comply if it means I'll give you all more peace of mind."

"And you'll - you're sure you don't feel like you're just - that you're useless? Or being a burden?"

Oh. Is that...

Tommy's eyes are down, but his cheek is pressed almost too hard against Wilbur's shoulder. Wilbur tries for a reassuring smile, leaning closer in turn.

"I try not to feel like a burden if my family's happy," he says. "And it makes you guys happy to see me well. Maybe some would say I should get a life outside of my family, and one day I'll probably dip my toes into other places, but for now I am rather content with how things have been going."

Wilbur takes a deep breath, and continues. "Tommy, you don't have to base your own worth and or happiness around being useful either. That's not a condition of our love - we just want you to enjoy life."

"I get that," Tommy says. "And I - it's what we said before. About knowing something is true, but not feeling like it is. Sometimes I feel like I should just - do something. But I don't know what."

"Well. Think about it this way," Wilbur pauses for a moment. "We live in a house halfway up a mountain, and have basically everything we need to live comfortably. We have daily chores that we get done with plenty of free time left to spend. There's no reason to not enjoy ourselves, because everything we want is right here."

A slight frown twitches in his expression. "Everything we could want and reasonably get, anyway. I'm sorry about Tubbo."

“I think Tubbo’s long since made peace with his decision,” Tommy laughs shakily. “It’s about time we let go of it too. But yeah, that’s - that’s a good way of thinking about it. Think about the reality of the situation.”

He bites his lip. “I don’t know what to do when my brain keeps nagging at me, though. I can only glide through the air for so long.”

Wilbur smiles. “Go for a walk.”

Tommy bursts into a laugh, again, this time brighter - surer. “Actually, that sounds like pretty good advice.”

~\*~

“Why is there egg all over the floor?”

Techno glances at Tommy.

“It wasn’t me,” Tommy protests immediately. “Wilbur started-”

“I was trying to stop Clementine from licking the cocoa powder,” Wilbur interjects. “That’s way more expensive than a few eggs.”

“You just straight up murdered the chickens’ young like that-”

“They’re unfertilized! We don’t have a c-”

“Clementine tried to lick the cocoa powder, Wilbur rushed over to stop her and accidentally tripped, and Tommy reached out to catch him, knocking over the bowl of eggs in the process.” Techno snaps his book shut and rises from his chair.

“I thought they were boiled and wouldn’t spill anything,” Tommy mumbles.

Phil sighs, and gingerly steps around the globby mess of yolks and white still seeping across the glossy wood flooring. “I had set them aside with the intention of boiling them when I got back. I suppose now we should find something else for breakfast.”

“I could threaten the chickens into laying more,” Tommy offers. “Clementine is very convincing.”

The dog in question perks her floppy ears at the sound of her name, raising her head from where it had laid on outstretched paws just a moment prior. Tommy leans down from his seat to scratch them.

“I don’t think that’s how chicken egg laying works,” Phil says as he tosses some flour around the mess, and roughly mixes it into a dough-like substance that’s much easier to wipe off the floor with a broom Techno then hands him.

He could probably pick through their eggplants and find a finally smaller one to cook up, as the season for most of their crop harvesting is mostly over now with the chill of cold weather. Add an impromptu speared fish, and they could-

“We could go down to Sanctuary early and bother Hbomb about it,” Wilbur pipes up. “He’s surprisingly good at cooking.”



“That... sounds good,” Phil says after a moment. Hbomb shouldn’t mind - the only other person he lives with is Ranboo anyway. “Any objections?”

“Sounds great,” Tommy says, looking a bit excited.

Techno shrugs.

Right then. In that case, he’ll definitely have to bring a fish.

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“What’s it like to be a father?”

Phil quirks an eyebrow. Of all the people to ask him that, he hadn’t expected *Ranboo* to be among them.

“Tiring,” he answers, the first thing that comes to mind. “And sometimes you regret it.”

Ranboo blinks, clearly surprised. “But - but you - your sons-”

“I love my sons,” Phil says. “I would die for them. But it doesn’t change the fact that there are people in the world who would have been a better parent than me.”

“So you would have - would have rather those people taken in your children?”

Phil shifts to the side of the bench, and pats the empty space. With only a moment of hesitation, Ranboo sits down beside him.

“Well, if I hadn’t taken them in, it’s likely they would have either grown up parentless or died,” Phil says frankly. “But I’m decently sure they would have survived - they’re all smart enough. It would have been down to luck.”

Like it usually is.

“And - if they *had* found someone, or some people, and said people were better parents than me - which is a shockingly low bar, by the way - I wonder.”

“There’s no way you could know, though,” Ranboo points out.

Phil smiles faintly. “No. But I also wonder, all the time, if they would have been better off without parent figures. They could have grown up and found friends, social groups - Techno certainly wouldn’t have developed his bloodthirsty persona if he hadn’t been introduced to war at such a young age.”

He looks down. “Wilbur and Tommy wouldn’t have felt the need to run off, go found a country, and almost die in 2 wars either. And Wilbur-”

The one thing that ran a mantra above all through Phil’s mind, as he had stood above the ruins of L’Manberg and heard Wilbur’s pleas to be killed, had been - *how had it gotten to this point?*

*How had he let it get to this point?*

He knows, now, but that doesn’t make the answers any easier.

“You tried your best,” Ranboo says.

“Sometimes your best isn’t enough,” Phil says, letting his head fall back onto the bench’s back support. He takes a moment to drown in the lull of ocean static, feel the stone beach wet with tide pools around them.

“But that’s why they’re here, isn’t it?” Ranboo asks. “Tommy says he loves you because you tried your best, learned, and didn’t stop trying.”

He-

“Tommy said that?” Phil blinks.

“Um - yeah?”

That’s - that makes sense, really. There’s nothing about that statement which should surprise him.

But... still.

A warm, almost burning feeling curls inside of his heart.

“At least you tried,” Ranboo exhales. “That - that means a lot. Especially to people like me.”

“Your parents weren’t exactly attentive, loving figures,” Phil guesses with a tilt of his head.

“No,” Ranboo murmurs. “I mean - like, they didn’t screw anything up monumentally, I guess. They were just - never there. I think my mother didn’t know what to do with me, and my stepfather... he really didn’t like me. Never did anything about it, but growing I just - I always felt his eyes judging me, you know?”

“I know about parents who never wanted you, yes,” Phil says.

“Oh.”

End avians are a dying species, but very few of those remaining have any desire to see it flourish again. The vast majority of End avians Phil has met are ancient, tired, and just... done.

His hatching had been considered a miracle, but not a welcome one. Keeping an End avian hatchling alive is a grueling, time-consuming, mind-numbing task spanning almost 3 centuries, and he knows his parents had done so reluctantly - more out of a lingering societal adherence to the rule of not letting their own child die than any genuine love.

It had been pretty obvious, from the way they’d chased him out of the nest once he was considered of age.

Hypixel is supposed to have child protection laws, though. Phil remembers their policies are surprisingly strict and well enforced on that front, at least for champions.

Speaking of which.

“Your mother claimed you as legitimate, didn’t she?” Phil asks. Relationships that would produce hybrids are fully outlawed in Hypixel, even if hybrids aren’t. It does make all hybrid children inherently illegitimate, however - unable to own property, compete in tournaments, or use public spaces - unless they’re either claimed by their parents, or pass Hypixel’s champion challenges for outsiders, like Techno did.

Claiming a hybrid son would have been a risky move for anyone's political career, though maybe Ranboo mother also hadn't cared for such a thing.

"She wanted at least one heir," Ranboo mumbles. "Been trying for years and couldn't get another child."

He laughs, a bitter tinge to his voice. "Great lot of good that did her when the Admin Counsel picked me to marry Tubbo. At least I brought some honor to the family house."

"But you don't care about that."

"No. Of course not." Ranboo tucks his long legs beneath his chin, shoe edges curling over the bench seat. "I've never really felt a parent's love, I guess. Just - I wanted to understand it a bit better."

Phil nods, but he can't provide the reassurance Ranboo wants - that kind that, as he said, could only come from a parent.

And Ranboo isn't his son, couldn't be, even if they both want it.

He can provide something else, though.

"I think you've turned out alright even without a proper parent," Phil says. "You're certainly mature enough for your age."

"Would a mature person run away from all their responsibilities?"

"I have known many people over the course of my lifetime, and most of them would have long since escaped this place entirely," Phil answers. "That fact that you are willing to go back to New L'Manberg is already admirable. And besides-"

He plucks a feather from his wing, loose and drifting to the wind, and tucks it behind Ranboo's ear. A reminder. "No one has any right to force that kind of responsibility on you. It's an incredibly unfair fate you've been handed."

"I know," Ranboo sighs. "But Tubbo made his choice, and I'll follow suit. I've made my peace with it too. It's just - it doesn't stop me from wishing things are easier."

"That's a perfectly valid wish," Phil hums. "Maybe one day."

"Yeah. Maybe."

Maybe one day.

## Chapter End Notes

glances at canon revivebur

glances at vos!wilbur

haha spot the difference guys

# there's a realm above the trees, where the lost are finally found

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“What do you think we should plant next year?” Phil asks. The squash vines have mostly withered by now - the eggplants should go next with the incoming winter bite, for now kept bayed by autumn.

The carrots and potatoes have long since been harvested, and the pumpkins just a week away from ripeness. Tommy stands over one of them, knocking on its shell.

“We could try tomatoes,” Tommy says. “And Tubbo told me about this new variety of potato called a ‘sweet potato’ from the eastern regions of the SMP that’s apparently rather delicious.”

“We might see about getting some new crop seeds on our way to New L’Manberg,” Phil muses. “Get some interesting variety going - though there’s not much that can grow to maturity in weather this far north.”

Winter takes away the agricultural work and replaces it with snow. Phil has to admit he’s not looking *too* forward to that, but there’s also plenty of time to kill and conversations to be had in the process.

Besides. He knows Techno’s already thinking of designs for a more mechanical system of snow removal.

“Alright - why don’t you and Techno start making sure there’s nothing left in the field to harvest,” he says to Tommy, “and Wilbur can go check on the chickens.”

“Actually,” Tommy says, grabbing an empty bucket from the side of the coophouse, “Techno and Wilbur are a bit... occupied.”

“Occupied?” Phil glances around, and realizes he doesn’t see either of them. Clementine, who had been sniffing around the twisting base of the oak overhanging their rippling fish pond, is now also nowhere to be seen.

“They fucked off to somewhere whispering about ants,” Tommy shrugs. “Into the forest.”

“We’re surrounded by forest.”

“Exactly.”

Phil sighs, but he can’t exactly begrudge Techno and Wilbur a little free time to... experiment with ants. They definitely deserve it.

“Let’s get to work without them,” he says. “We’ll need to get our current vegetables into storage too.”

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“I think there are 2 - wait, they are definitely 2 different colonies,” Wilbur confirms. “And they’ve definitely started fighting.”

Before his eyes, a tiny black ant bites a deathgrip onto the leg of a near identical one, and with a violent, jerky yank, snaps the limb clean off. They both tumble backwards, limbs all twirling around

frantically like broken clock hands.

A shame Clementine isn't here to see it. she ran off to chase some squirrels moments before the ants had started warring.

"So there's a total of 3 ant colonies beneath this boulder," Techno says. "The two carpenter ant colonies and whatever the pale white ones are. I suppose hiding beneath it provides good protection."

"We're also surrounded by forest, which means bugs and dead things are everywhere to eat," Wilbur notes. "Which makes for bigger populations."

He raps in knuckle against a nearby tree, the wood a dark, rough spruce and dotted with pale green moss. Ivy creeps around it, the leaves thankfully not rash-inducing, unlike whatever he'd accidentally touched last time.

"Maybe we should try to find an arboreal colony," he muses. "Trees seem like a good place to build a nest."

"There would be more birds in the trees," Techno points out. "Too dangerous."

"There's birds hopping on the ground too," Wilbur counters. "I think you should climb some to look anyway."

His expression brightens as another thought comes to him. "Wouldn't leaves be a good weaving material for nests? What if there's ants that use leaves to weave nests?"

"Maybe," Techno says, though he looks rather dubious.

Techno has quite the imagination, just like Wilbur - but sometimes Wilbur wishes he would speculate something *fun* with him for once.

No matter. This ant observation operation (and isn't that just a fun thing to shout excitedly?) is going well enough, anyways - and he suspects the number of colonies around this boulder will be moving from 3 to 2 in less than a few days. He makes another mark in his journal about it, and tucks it back into the pocket of his cloak.

"You'll climb some trees and just look, right?" Wilbur asks. "Come on. Just a little climb and search."

Techno rolls his eyes, setting down the thin stick he had been poking a patch of ant-covered moss with. "Sure. I'll climb half the trees in this forest. After I consult the library's section on Novixl's insects one more time."

"You know there's only like 2 books in there," Wilbur yawns. "I've read them front to back and there is nothing relevant."

"You tend to miss things," Techno answers. "And *I* haven't read them."

Wilbur braces an arm against the tree and slowly sits down again. He begins kneeling his fingers through a mass of writhing ants. Thankfully, this species doesn't sting - he had a nasty shock with the colony of red ants - scarlet moon ants, Techno had called them - beneath the giant sequoia tree a little ways west of here. Those ones have pincer-like jaws that can fucking *bite*, which is fascinating, but also very painful for his fingers.

When Techno had seen him cursing in pain while scrambling away, shaking his hands like a rag being flung dry of water, he laughed and proceeded to let the little buggers snip all over the thick, calloused skin of his hands just to show he could. Fucking hybrid genetics.

These ones, however, are much tamer on human skin. And his wounds - major *and* minor ones - have healed more than enough for Wilbur to be crawling around the ground among them.

“What do you think would happen if we flooded a nest?” he asks. “We haven’t seen how they deal with the rain yet. Unfortunately.”

“If you try rushing outside in the middle of a thunderstorm again, Dad will take away your cane,” Techno says flatly. “And I will make sure you don’t get it back until you’ve stopped being an idiot.”

“Point taken.” Wilbur rolls his eyes. In his defense, it had been only a *mildly* harsh thunderstorm, and he’d been excited! He had put on his rainboots and everything!

“So when are we flooding them?”

Techno whips his head back to him from an ant-covered leaf, looking scandalized. From the angle Wilbur sees his expression, laying flat on the ground with ants crawling and battling over his fingers, he actually appears rather silly. Like he’s eaten a crack pepper and is just now feeling the entirety of their flaming spiciness punch his face.

“*Wilbur*,” he says, clearly protesting. “That’s - that’s cruel!”

Wilbur tilts his head, amused. Techno always did find it in himself to care for the smallest of things.

“You kill animals all the time,” he says.

“For food! And pelts and fertilizer! That we use!” Techno looks mildly distressed now. “And I make it quick. This is just - why?”

“For science,” Wilbur says vaguely.

“I’m all for science,” Techno says. “But the ant colonies are just - existing. Here. They didn’t - it feels wrong.”

Oh, that’s interesting. Wilbur knows Techno would sacrifice quite a lot in the name of accumulating knowledge - so it seems he hadn’t been aware of just how deep *this* philosophy of his runs.

Is that why he had stuck with plant-related experiments this time? If asked, Wilbur doubts Techno could really explain down to the roots of *why* he’s averse to it.

But there’s more than enough personal baggage behind the sentiment that they both understand. Killing - creatively, uniquely, to test things. See what happens. Examine the effects on the world.

“Alright then,” he says. “Maybe we could get an artificial colony set up some time and do some less - ah, lethal tests easier.”

If Techno would be upset by the idea of flooding the ant nest, even if Wilbur had been personally rather intrigued by it - well, who is Wilbur to begrudge him his peace? Especially, of course, after everything Techno has done to try and escape his mindset of induced violence.

Techno's shoulders relax, just slightly. Wilbur smiles as another pair of ants begin clawing their way up his cheek, fighting all the while.

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"I got some offers back in Beastire," Techno says.

Tommy looks up from the guitar, and Wilbur looks up from guiding Tommy's hands.

"What kind of offers?" Phil asks, though his hands don't stop their knitting.

"Offers for tours, speeches, endorsements..." Techno trails off. "What you would expect from companies trying to strike a deal with a famous author."

"Oh?"

"I feel like I would be wasting something if I don't take up at least a few of them," Techno admits. "Now that I'm not doing this other... Blood God thing. It's probably just old habits talking, but..."

He trails off, looking out the window. There's a reason that, despite how much he proclaims a desire for freedom, he tries to keep his life choices as limited as possible.

As simple as possible.

Or at the very least, an illusion of such, to him. That illusion has long faded into the mist of uncertainty, however, and now he stands at the crossroads brought upon him as a consequence.

"Maybe wait a few years?" Phil suggests. His tone is gentle. "There will still be offers then. You have time."

Oh, right. They do have time.

The rest of their lives, in fact.

"Yeah," Techno hums. He brushes a hand down a cool, smooth page, and tucks the gilded gold-ribbon bookmark into the crack before closing it.

The title of the book says *A Comprehensive History and Treatise of Potato Farming*, the author printed below in dark green on a pale white background; *Whitelisted*.

The inside cover, instead of the blank mint green that would accompany commercial copies, says *Private Edition, for Behest of the Author*.

He has time to decide. And no one can force him to choose sooner than he needs to.

~\*~

"Why do I feel like I'll regret letting you two do this?" Techno sighs.

"You probably will once we're drunk," Ranboo says. Upon a frown from Techno, he rectifies, "when we're tipsy. Only somewhat tipsy."

"You'll regret it when we get *you* drunk," Tommy says cheerfully. He dumps the bucket of pulped pomegranates into the barrel.



How they had tracked down sellers for some of the assortment of fruits that now lies before them on the table, Techno has no idea. But the stone ground of the ravine is now littered with bits of fruit and vegetables, and splattered with juice, water, and other... questionable substances.

And there's beer. Lots and lots of beer. Techno's still not quite sure how they convinced enough people to sell them so much beer either.

"Hey Ranboo, you know what would be funny?" Tommy asks, taking another sip of said beer from a shot glass.

"Yeah?"

"We're makin' wine. Or beer. Or cider - we're making something with alcohol." Tommy burps. "What if we bought up all the supply of alcohol in Sanctuary. And create a monopoly. Where we control the prices."

"And then we'll buy all the arable land, and make people come to buy our stuff on our land," Ranboo says with what sounds like a cheerful note of agreement. His cheeks are tinged with a pink of light dooziness. "And they have to follow our rules if they wanna be there and farm food and - and drink away their sorrows. And then we call it a country."

He pauses. "I'll be president."

"Yeah. You be president," Tommy agrees.

"Thanks... wait!" Ranboo frowns. "I don't wanna be president!"

"Too late. You said you would be," Tommy says. "*I'm* not gonna be president. Being president sucks."

"It does!" Ranboo exclaims. "Tommy, let's run away together and leave all this presidency nonsense behind."

Tommy giggles, and nearly face-plants himself on the table. Techno catches him just in time.

Good grief. They're probably drunk enough. And drunk people trying to create ew alcoholic beverages in a way that is decidedly not how people usually create new alcoholic beverages is not a good combination.

Why had he let Phil talk him into babysitting them again?

Techno pries the shot glass and wine bottle from Tommy's mildly reluctant fingers, places them on the shelf of a high rock alcove a few steps away, and then does the same for Ranboo.

Then, he gathers up all the barrel covers and ensures they're firmly in place on the line of barrels against the ravine wall - the last thing they need is half-fermented, *questionable* beverages spilled over the ravine floor. It would be a rather disastrous fire hazard, especially given how all the smoke would rise *into* the house above.

"You too have had enough," Techno says. "I'm not allowing more."

Tommy gives him a mild pout, and then manages to stagger out his chair and bury his face into Techno's chest.

“Hug,” he mutters.

Techno wraps his arms around Tommy, and holds him close. The motion is smoother now, easier. More familiar.

“I wanna hug too,” Ranboo says. In a flash of purple particles, he’s worming his way beneath Techno’s arms as well.

Techno sighs. He’ll never understand why people want to get drunk.

~\*~

“I know you’re Whitelisted,” Scott says.

Techno takes a moment to deeply regret setting foot out of Sanctuary’s garden so early. The flowers are still beautiful, welcoming, the area lush with peaceful green, the air cool and perfect for that parkour course he *still* hasn’t set the new record for, even over a year later - why wouldn’t he have just *stayed* there?

Or better yet, stayed in their house, and maybe helped Phil with his knitting or practiced more violin?

Or, *even* better yet, decided to continue practicing the parkour course *just* another hour or two more today?

Sometimes, Pete comes and watches him try, and occasionally runs the course himself. Techno knows all the shortcuts by now - it’s down to skill and timing.

He’d much prefer Pete’s calm, analytical observation and occasional suggestions to the sharp, prying gaze Scott is judging him with.

“Then I suppose you’ve drawn your own conclusions about it?” Techno asks, because Scott says the words with such certainty, and with such specificity, that there’s no way he doesn’t know for sure.

In which, Techno will save his breath from the faked denial.

“I have. Plenty of conclusions. But of course, I can’t exactly confirm anything without talking to you about it.”

Techno sighs, and turns away - back towards the path, to the forest north, where he can don the elytra and leave this mess for another day.

Scott is one of the few people in Sanctuary who knows for certain he was the Blood God, the famed Technoblade who once haunted the continents like a grim terror, and who never dies. Now that he knows Techno is Whitelisted as well, however he figured that out...

Scott keeps pace with him.

“You know better than to talk to other people about it,” Techno says finally. He continues down the path, every step closer to the home where Phil, Tommy, and Wilbur are already awaiting him. The edges of the distant mountain horizon, by now, are tinged with the slightest break of yellow.

“Can I get *you* to talk about it?”

“Willingly? No.” Techno pauses in his words. “Not soon, anyway.”

He doesn't know what the future will hold for him. He doesn't feel like speculating. And so, he can only wait.

Maybe one day, he'll feel confident enough to share a little more. But for now he speeds up his pace and eventually disappears in the forests at Sanctuary's edge. Scott doesn't follow him further.

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"The crystal heals him back to-" Wilbur rolls the dice. 15. "To 70 percent of his health. Alright, it's Ranboo's turn."

"I just lost my weapons!" Ranboo protests. He jerks an accusing finger at Pete. "This thief made off with them, and then had the stupidity of dying to the void!"

"The void's hunger is bottomless," Phil intones.

Pete shrugs, looking utterly unrepentant.

"Philza the dragon is attacking you, Ranboo," Wilbur says. "He's charging in on a full frontal assault. What do you do?"

"Uh - what do I have on me?" Ranboo asks.

Wilbur checks his notes. "4 silver coins in a pouch, your clothes, a rotten tomato, and a soggy piece of steak. It's oily and only slightly charred. And your abilities, from being a goat hybrid."

Ranboo appears to consider his options for a moment, though Wilbur can tell from the twitching corner of his mouth that he's already decided on something that'll probably be quite good.

"I use my leaping ability to jump onto Phil, and then smack his eyes with the steak," Ranboo finally decides. "That will be my two movements."

"Smack my eyes with your steak?" Phil asks, raising an eyebrow. "What did I ever do to you?"

"You're literally the monster we're fighting," Lizzie says. "Well - that me and Ranboo are fighting. Since Pete and H were dumb enough to get knocked out early."

"It was luck!" Hbomb protests. "That stealth roll completely screwed me over!"

"Hush," Wilbur says. Though he's tempted to let this argument play out, they do need to move onto the next bit.

Namely, Ranboo attempting to smack dragon Phil's eyes with a piece of soggy steak.

"Ranboo, roll for accuracy," Wilbur says. "Twice. Phil, roll for evasion."

They each take a dice, and roll accordingly.

Ranboo ends up with a 3 for the jump, and a 14 for the steak smack. Phil's dice rolls a 2.

Wilbur huffs a laugh. "Ranboo tries to jump onto Phil. He would have fallen far short, but for some reason Phil decided it would be a good idea to twist directly into Ranboo's path. Ranboo wields his soggy steak, and smacks Phil's eyeballs with it."

"Rude," Phil mutters.

“Phil now has a vision impairment due to the oil and water in his eyes,” Wilbur continues.

Ranboo dies shortly after, from a well-rolled attempt to choke him with Phil’s magical death breath.

The vision impairment ends up being what costs Phil in the end, however. The campaign culminates in a final showdown between him and Lizzie - he would have succeeded in the final attack to kill her, had his vision impairment not lowered his stats enough for him to miss.

“And so, Lizzie claims the treasure - a shiny black dragon egg - and hops through the portal. Tales of her dragon-slaying greatness are told for generations to come.” Wilbur leans back into his chair with a long, creaking stretch of his limbs. “The end.”

“Woo me,” Lizzie says. “H, you owe me 5 shells.”

Hbomb grumbles, but hands the money over.

“Getting my organs disintegrated by magical death breath was totally worth smacking Phil’s eyeballs with soggy steak,” Ranboo says.

“It’s called the Dragon’s Breath,” Phil grumbles.

“Maybe next campaign you could do it again,” Pete says. “You do seem to have a great propensity for hitting places that should not be hit with things that should not be used to hit other things.”

At that, Hbomb turns and winces.

“What is it?” Pete asks, clearly noticing.

“This will be my last campaign,” Ranboo admits, shoulders slumping down slightly. “In Sanctuary, at least. I’m supposed to go back soon.”

“Back to where?” Lizzie asks.

Ah, right. The rest of Sanctuary never did learn what the deal is with Ranboo, and they’re not the prying enough type to randomly ask.

“Where I came from,” Ranboo responds vaguely. “This was always meant to be a temporary stay. Though it’s been fun.”

“We’re going with him, actually,” Wilbur says. “Me, Phil, and my brothers. We’ll be back in a few months - but Ranboo won’t be.”

“Oh.” Lizzie glances at Pete, and they both seem to agree not to press further. “Well, good luck.”

“If you two or Scott want to DM in my absence and gather a new group until I’m back, you could,” Wilbur says. “I’ll lend you my notes. But just a heads up - this will be the last session involving me in a while too.”

“When will you guys leave?” Pete asks. “I haven’t heard anything about this.”

“You forget they usually don’t feature in the gossip circles, since they live apart from the rest of us,” Lizzie says. “But yeah, when *will* you leave?”

Wilbur glances at Phil. They've worked out a rough schedule by now, and have made plans with Techno, Tommy, and Tubbo as well.

The trip back to New L'Manberg, one last time - or at least, the last time in a long, long while.

"Around the middle of October," he says. In a week or two, depending on the weather. "We've made ship arrangements already."

"Well." Pete pauses, and nods. "I suppose we wish you all good luck."

~\*~

Techno had told him this is a good fishing spot. Tommy can see why, now.

He's reeled in 5 fish so far, in the past hour. The river flows, but not with the swiftness that might chase some fish away from his hook. It's a calmer rhythm, unconcerned with the rapidity some other waters race to.

Tommy isn't fishing for food, or to use them in any way, really, so he lets them go after they've been caught. It's more about the principle of the thing - though those fish will have to live on with one hell of a mouthache.

He almost feels bad for them, but then he remembers they're fish. So.

The forest is dark today; clouds cover the sky, and the canopy of branches and leaves and abandoned bird nests cover the clouds. Despite the chill, the trees still hold autumn leaves of dark reds and golds, waving in unison to the winds like old, sweeping fans. With each stroke, another splash of color drifts to the forest floor.

Thrashing jerks the line. Tommy reels for a few solid minutes before wrestling up a salmon - this one must have gotten lost from the rest of its school. All the salmon populations around here should be gathered in the larger rivers a little ways north.

This, however, is the forest south of Sanctuary. Past the spell of protection, the waving fields of wildflowers, the line that forbids the trees of the forest to search any further for new ground to root.

Here, the river is small and the pines are few. Leaves tickle Tommy's hair every other second with the wind. The air smells of thin nettle wiring through musked mushrooms, and everywhere he looks he sees the creatures of the woodland stockpiling for the winter.

Tommy sets the frantically wriggling salmon onto a bed of leaves that crinkle like fireworks paper beneath it, scales scuffed and worn and yet glossy beneath what few beams of light hit it, eyes blinking in tandem with a mouth desperately gulping for air.

Someone in Sanctuary will want it, and if not, Tommy can have Phil fly it back up to the house to cook. The fish in their pond are of smaller species, and this salmon is decently sized - which means it is easily longer than the length of Tommy's arm. This is the only fish he'll be able to carry back today, now that he has it.

Tommy unsheathes a dagger from his belt, and spikes the salmon through the brain. Techno had taught him that - they would die quicker and suffer less, this way, instead of slowly thrashing themselves into an exhausted frenzy while choking to death.

A moment later, the salmon's entire body relaxes like it's falling asleep, fins drooping, tail splayed to one side. Tommy shifts back into a comfortable fishing position, turns to the slowly eddying river, and casts his line out once more. There's time for yet another hour of the quiet.

It's a good day - a beautiful day, a peaceful day, a relaxing day. Everything he could hope for.

He closes his eyes, and lets calm stillness overtake him.

## Chapter End Notes

no scarlet moon ants are not a real species but if i get to make up facts about phil's biology i can use different environments to justify more normal worldbuilding elements too. like a fictional ant species lmao. the little details, people. carpenter ants are real though.

uhh i was gonna say some other stuff but i forgot what they were (wait i remembered one thing - weaver ants exist and they weave nests together from leaves and larval silk. wilbur and techno won't find any though - they dont live on novixl.)

yadda yadda normal stuff about my links to other social media im too tired to put here. it's in the notes of most other chapters. my tumblr especially has a lot of worldbuilding extras about this world some of you might be interested in.

## to whom owns the woods

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“You know I love you, right?” Tommy says.

Wilbur pauses briefly in his step. His good foot catches on a crack in the cobble - but Tommy is steadying him long before he finds his balance overtipped.

“Yes?” Wilbur asks. His tone is uncertain, not in the truth of the aforementioned statement, but in why Tommy has chosen now to suddenly address it.

“I just want you to know,” Tommy says, eyes somewhere distant - towards the ocean horizon, though there is no ocean to be seen from their position on the wooded southern path out of Sanctuary. It’s mostly grass and sky. An ocean of sorts, perhaps.

“Thanks,” Wilbur says. “Love you too?”

He peers around the rustic cabins and mostly empty fields around them, just visible through the trees that pepper the area. The agricultural center of Sanctuary, where farmers are mostly self-sufficient on their produce and regularly sell to the rest of the town.

Continuing, the path winds into the forest proper. But before that, there is a field. *The* field.

A stretch of meadow whose ends Wilbur can not see, bending around the town. Where the trees are ruthlessly cut down and saplings uprooted, an artificial border, but the wildflowers bloom free. He still remembers how bewildered he had felt, when Hbomb had first shown him and Techno the path last winter, this space so unnatural and yet still full of nature.

“You wanna go fishing again?” Tommy asks, blinking as Wilbur leads them further and further away from town. “We have our own river for that.”

“Not quite,” Wilbur says. He halts in his steps, and blades of green tickle at his elbows. The stone path below is cracked with grass and clovers and tiny, still flowering azaleas.

“You’ve picked flowers here before, haven’t you?” Wilbur asks. The meadow is mostly waves of dark green caught with the yellows and browns of fall, leaves blown from the forest to crest atop the grass like their own imitation, all humming, swaying, twirled with the wind.

There’s still a few flowers around, dots of purple and white and pale golden yellow, of which Wilbur recognizes rhododendrons and a few ringing harebells. Plenty of mushrooms, too, are curled around grass stems and to be seen if they are searched for.

“There were a lot more flowers here earlier in the summer,” Tommy murmurs. “When you first showed me this place. A few berry bushes should be ripe now, though.”

“You picked all the ones you could collect?”

“The flowers? Yes. The berries? Haven’t had a chance yet.”

Wilbur reaches into an inner cloak pocket and pulls out a newly made ender chest. He clicks the switch and lets it enlarge as it falls to the ground with a clicked thud.

Then he reaches in, and pulls out a large basket.

“We have time now,” he says. “If you want, we could pick some berries.”

~\*~

“Do you have plans?” Wilbur asks, sinking an arm deeper into the bush to snag a particularly tricky bunch of salmonberries. “For... the future?”

“The distant future? As in, 5 years later or something like that?”

Wilbur hums, and pops another salmonberry in his mouth. They usually taste better as a jam with bread and some honey, but this is more for satisfying the little wriggling of hunger that’s started to take root in his stomach.

“I guess,” he says, teeth still popping the berry’s tiny nubs of juice and flesh. “Anywhere in particular you want to go?”

Tommy shrugs. “Not really. I’ll think of something eventually.”

“Do you-” Wilbur frowns.

“I’ll always welcome you around,” Tommy says, clearly sensing the question. To Wilbur’s relief, he doesn’t seem offended. “Like I said, I love you. Brothers, remember?”

“Sometimes you love a person, but still don’t want to be around them,” Wilbur says quietly. “I know not now, but like - I thought you might not want me watching over you shoulder. Considering what happened the last time we left home together.”

He forces his grip on the basket to loosen, and sets it down on an area between them where the grass has been flattened. Then, he resumes picking more salmonberries.

“I know it’s a dumb concern,” Wilbur adds. “I just - wanted to be sure.”

Tommy exhales. “We can never be sure of the future. But I will say, Wilbur, that even knowing what I do now - I would have still followed you out of that house years ago. I don’t regret that I came with you - I regret I didn’t take opportunities to give you the help you needed.”

Wilbur bites his lip, briefly, before saying; “oh.”

Tommy snorts. “For all the people skills you supposedly have, you’re awfully dense sometimes.”

“I think for a time I forgot how to be a normal person,” Wilbur admits. “Back in L’Manberg and Pogtopia I was always manipulating, but I was never... socializing. Not in the way people would consider real human connection.”

“We’ll, you’ve got us now,” Tommy says. He throws a salmonberry at Wilbur’s head - Wilbur catches it, just barely, and pops it in his mouth again. This one’s also relatively flavorless, though with a hint of tartness.

“Yeah,” Wilbur says. He smiles.



Tommy grins back. "And I really don't have any plans like that, except maybe to visit Tubbo and Ranboo again once their government thing is over. But we'll see, won't we? And you, Techno, and Dadza are always welcome."

Wilbur nods, and relaxes his shoulders, and repeats in his head those words Tommy has said; *I love you. Brothers, remember?*

It's enough that he's still smiling by the time they rise and begin heading back towards Sanctuary with a basket full of berries.

~\*~

"You're very determined about this, aren't you?" Pete says.

Techno rolls his eyes.

The sun will beginning its daily descent soon. It's about time he leaves - go back home, and await tomorrow's new opportunities.

*But.*

He resists the urge to sigh despairingly. *47 seconds* - that's the record he'll have to beat, given how Pete had set *another* one a few months ago and shaved a second off his previous time.

Techno's personal best is 49 seconds. It has been for the past 2 months.

"I'll get it one day," he says eventually. Pete tilts a blobby head at him.

"I've been doing this course since I was a child," he says. "Honestly, I was amazed you managed a sub-50 time in 2 years."

"Practice," Techno shrugs. "More time than I know what to do with."

He frowns, glancing to the huge hourglass still busy resetting his time, sand still dripping down the center like a million powdered snow pieces. "And this is obviously not my first foray into parkour."

"I had gathered," Pete says. He seats himself on one of the benches lining the garden. "Have you competed in tournaments or competitions before?"

The answer is yes. Yes, Techno has - in addition to the challenge of mobility that normal fighting presents, many places - most notably Hypixel - hold competitions regarding parkour. Solely movement based actions.

Move from point A, to point B.

Techno hasn't participated in many, though not for lack of practice. It's more that the sheer act of taking off his cloak, and even mask, had left him feeling an exposed vulnerability that he could never quite shake off enough to concentrate.

But he has participated - and won - some. He had the skills, and the motivation - after all, why shouldn't the Blade, the Blood God, the prodigal son, conquer a field if he could?

"A few," Techno responds. "Mostly in Hypixel."

Pete raises an eyebrow. "Ah."

"Bad experience?" Techno wouldn't be surprised if Pete holds dislike of the place. The quiet watchfulness of the garden, serene and self-assured calm, seems almost a reflection of their caretaker himself. And if Hypixel lacks anything, it would be the patience Pete conducts himself with so easily.

"Not really bad experience," Pete says. "Just a different one."

"It's different, alright," Techno says. "I imagine it did not suit you."

"It was alright when no one knew who I was," Pete admits. He bends down to smother a round, nubbed hand over a patch of acorns and a small, half-rotten apple. When he rises again, they're floating around inside the slime appendage.

Techno has seen the way Pete consumes nutrients several times by now, but it never ceases to fascinate him. Though, one could argue he's rather easily fascinated these days.

"I did well at the games. A bit too well - eventually, people would start targeting me. Calling to me. Asking me for - well, you know."

People ask famous people all sorts of things. Of course Techno knows.

"It got too much?" Techno asks.

"Sort of," Pete says. "I can't say I was terribly stressed about it, not like some other people might be, but that's because I don't care about the scoreboard and I had gone into Hypixel with that mindset in mind. I've seen people who think the world will collapse on them if they don't finish first."

Techno hides a wince. He imagines he once qualified as one of those people.

Pete gives him a knowing look. "It was more how people who were always judging me. And how, after a while, all the games started to feel the same. Eventually I decided I've experienced enough and came back here."

"Must feel nice to finally leave," Techno says. He takes a seat beside Pete; the bench is tingling with a breadth of winter chill. A month ago there was a white, apple-sized shape just beneath - a spider's egg sac, woven of silk and the appearance of fine cotton.

Scraps of the sac still remain, occasionally fluttering, but Techno witnessed the hatching himself weeks ago. Thousands of tiny black dots crittering into the deep cravasses of the garden, now much barer of live plants.

"It is," Pete says. "It's always a nice feeling when you're coming home."

Techno draws his cloak, pale blue and white trims, up to his cheek. He should think about digging that scarf from his closet again.

"And when you're getting away from the scoreboards, presumably," Techno says.

Pete smiles. "I imagine you'd be familiar with that, given how good you are at parkour as well. And your determination to defeat my score."

"The principle of it," Techno says, somewhat distantly. "Saw the number and wanted to pass it - but nowadays it's more about how I can't seem to give up on things."

He's still too competitive.

"You seem to have given up a lot from your past life," Pete points out. "However you lived previously, it has to have been significantly different from this, and for a while - you still have traces of Hypixel influence on you."

"I was a champion," Techno admits, because there's actually quite a few of those. "Wasn't born there, but I passed the trials."

"I never bothered with the trials," Pete says.

"You would have passed them easily."

"I know. But I just - it was never more than a fancy title for me. Didn't care for it." Pete pauses, and turns his head to stare Techno more directly in the eyes. The shells of acorns blob around where his brain should be. "Did you?"

Techno looks down. "Once."

"Oh." Pete pauses. "Do you regret it? Taking part in Hypixel's games?"

Techno leans back into the bench seat. A wall of cold presses into him in spiraled patterns, but it fades quickly enough.

Hypixel and its tournaments had been some of the tamer activities he had participated in as the Blood God. Deaths were usually discouraged and kept to a minimum.

But Hypixel was where the tournament threads started. Where people contracted him into bloodier, more dangerous battles. Where his reputation continued to spiral into a flood of fear he did not understand and could not contain.

Phil may have allowed him to fight in wars, but Hypixel had been where the persona of the Blood God had been developed - because everyone else had believed in it.

"Yes," Techno says finally. "I think I do regret it."

It took him away from his family.

They sit in silence for a while, comfortably enough. Techno watches two hawks circle each other around the garden. Pete plucks the occasional leaf or acorn or still blooming flower to pass through his skin and absorb.

Techno would like to study that biology one day. Slime hybrids (though, technically not hybrids - they're produced from a combination of natural environment magic and human-induced artificial induction and thus aren't really crossbreeds) are exceedingly rare and so little is known of... anything, really, about them.

He could be the first one to publish a book on the subject, perhaps. If he could convince Pete to go along with him. And find more sample sizes, because one person isn't enough.

"What made you stop?"

Techno looks up at Pete. "What?"

“What made you stop caring?” Pete clarifies. “About the scoreboards. And come here? I’m curious.”

The answer is *my family*, because continuing down his path wouldn’t have been good for any of them. But that doesn’t really answer the question in a way either of them wishes it to.

“I realized...” Techno bites his lip. “I realized what the scoreboards were measuring - the battles and stuff - were leading’ me to do things I didn’t really want to do.”

“Like - mercenary jobs?” Pete asks. “I know contractors lurk around Hypixel a lot.”

Techno exhales. “Yeah. Like mercenary jobs. I never liked killin’ much, but I felt I - everyone was looking at me like I should. So I went along with it for a while.”

*Went along with it for a while* is about the biggest understatement of his violent career he’s ever said.

Pete digests the words for a few moments. “And then you decided it wasn’t good for you to keep continuing?”

Techno nods. “Wasn’t good for me and my family. And all of that business was too linked together. So I - well, my father, really - made the choice to pull us away from it all.”

He frowns. “I’m still too competitive, though. Can’t stop myself.”

“It’s a natural part of many people to be competitive,” Pete says. “As long as you’re competing in something that doesn’t hurt others and isn’t too taxing on you mentally, it’s perfectly normal.”

Techno hides another wince as Pete manages to unknowingly hit every part of what had been wrong with his previous mindset.

“I spend a little too much time on this course than what would be considered normal,” he says ruefully, tilting his head up to catch the polished gleam of a hanging metal platform in the sunlight.

“I do too,” Pete laughs. “But it’s more for a love of movement and skill-honing than anything else.”

Techno nods.

Like he writes because he loves it - because he wants to learn more about the world and share that knowledge with others. Because he wants to discover new things, exciting things, observe and catalogue and theorize and test and confirm-

Because it brings him, as Wilbur would say, great joy in life.

And Techno knows - slowly and unsteadily, but he knows nonetheless - he wants nothing more than to channel his energy, competitive and otherwise, towards what brings him joy. What brings his family joy.

“I’d like to be like that some day,” he says. “Think about the world like you. Like external motivation is second to the internal satisfaction of accomplishment.”

Pete laughs, and nudges his shoulder with his own. “My friend, you may not realize it - but you’re already on the way there.”

*"The squids are completely useless,  
Just be glad it's them, not wolves.  
You drown them, stab them, watch them die,  
What did they ever do to you?  
Spread the message around the world,  
Squids are people too."*

Wilbur finishes with a flourish that's only slightly swayed from his tipsy state.

"What kind of fucking cracked up drugs were you on when you wrote that song?" Tommy asks. Everyone else in the bar is giving Wilbur looks ranging from amusement to disbelief to silent, doubled over laughter.

Wilbur shrugs.

Not-famous-Ninja - the one who had originally sold Tommy and Phil the guitar Wilbur is now performing with, snorts nearby. "Good to see my creation is being put to good use."

"Of course it is." Wilbur smiles at him dazzlingly, to Tommy's groan in the background. Then he takes a drink of cider from his mug, and launches into another song.

~\*~

The inner reaches of the mountains twist deeper and wilder the further away from the light of civilization Techno goes.

It is night; the moon a pale light crescent among the black sea of stars. Monsters rattle and shake in the darkness enveloping.

There are many forests shoring these mountain bases. Higher up, trees shrink to shrubbery, and then shrink to the most stubborn of clinging weeds and moss.

Techno is around half an hour's flight from home. That is enough distance to be completely lost in this dark maze of entangling bramble, whispering leaves, branches reaching from the shadows like cage bars around his figure. Each trunk captured with just enough light to reveal the trapped spirits within, faces gnarled with despair, or fury, or resignation, or serenity.

He is surrounded with dark and the palest trace of lines to guide him. He cannot see much besides black, and the occasional glow of moonbeam on the forest bed, and the flare of late-blooming fireflies.

There are stories in the dance of shadow and light, the almost overwhelming static of wind whistles through canopy, like a hundred thousand arrows shot clear through a tunnel.

Triumphs and tragedies, operas and campfire songs. Techno wants to catch them all within his gently curved palms, breathe life into their weak, trembling figures - all lines thin as silk thread and spun like fractal wire - and then shape their growth, larger and stronger and taking root into the sea of mind, and eventually breaking off to plant offspring of their own.

Leaves crunch beneath him, easily. Crinkled like firework paper.

Clementine isn't here with him tonight, despite how much she wanted to be. She seems to have an expectation with nighttime flights into the mountains.

Techno isn't sure why he's here, beyond a vague desire to explore beneath the darkness of night. Here, the moon is seen in splotches throughout the canopy, as though its pale whiteness has been hacked apart and thrown against a black glass ceiling. This blackness, however, of leaves and branches and night creatures who dare disturb the static lull, roils back and forth like a sea of ink.

"What are we, in the grand scheme of things?" he muses with a huff. "The mountains are so vast and expansive. My mass might as well be mathematically insignificant."

Whatever they do, they might as well not do, to the grand universe itself.

But everything is relative as well. From Techno's perspective - well, then it is absolutely worth doing.

A wolf howls, somewhere in the distance, and soon others join in. Techno allows a smile to tug the corner of his lips, and continues his trek through the darkness and wood and wet earth below.

It's a beautiful night. And the world is alive. It is something to be loved, to be cherished, to be experienced.

Techno wishes to love it all. He is beginning to. He's happier, this way - and he thinks his family would as well. Wilbur, especially - he had always loved trawling through the wilds when they were younger, poking every wriggling thing they come across, eating questionable substances from strange leaves to mushrooms and moss.

Techno pauses to reach a hand to groves of a lined dark beside him. He touches wood, rough bark, a smooth ivy creeper that has yet to grow into maturity and seek a victim to carry their spores.

A furry shape skitters through the underbrush beside him. Its tail is lashing into the darkness before Techno has time to blink, stirring long-forgotten trails of dirt and dust.

He continues. The elytra on his back lies flat, like an insect's wings at rest, a steady rhythm shifting up and down with each tread through the soft ground.

The night passes like this for a while, Techno extending a wary trail of trust to the darkness as he navigates the forest and the life it houses, it is, everything alive. He cannot identify species, and barely map size. But eventually the trees thin and moonbeams dance in more and more abundance, until, like the ribbon-shredded ends of a dark autumn dress, the ground patterns to gray solidity and the cover of canopies give way to the stars once more.

*"What kind of idiot goes mountaineering in the middle of the night?"*

Techno quirks a smile. Indeed.

The peak is small, the cliffs not nearly as steep. Techno is careful nonetheless, as the footholds decrease and available handholds as well.

The mountains are silent, as is their right. Techno ascends even as the last of leaning trees disappear to below and he's left with the moon, stars, and soft, poking moss clumps for company.

The mountain peak is just that - a peak, at least in relativity. A small rock, the size of his hand, bottom melded firmly to the rest of the mountain below. When Techno's head breaches above it, he gazes on into the darkness around for a long few moments, and finally places his hand on the rock for a few more.

There's no good place to sit down and watch the world for a bit, unlike some other peaks, but Techno doesn't mind. There are always other mountains to climb, later. Instead he places his chin on the rock, closes his eyes, and takes a deep breath.

Then, he turns and begins his careful descent back down. He has a family to return to before dawn, after all, to assure them he remains well.

## Chapter End Notes

no before you ask i dont know what cracked up substance i was on when i wrote that last scene either but probably the same as whatever i was on when i wrote the early wilbur scenes but with a bit more lemon flavor

if the plot feels a bit delayed right its because once again a chapter has split into 3 because it would make more sense for the structure of the chapters overall (even if this chapter's pacing is just all over the place but fixing that would have required another chapter break and im just not dealing with that) but im taking this as an excuse to trim out some more unnecessary scenes in the next few chapters and shorten the overall chapter count while also managing to preserve pacing HAH i have a *chapter limit* now!

# **gaze off into the boundless skyline**

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“That’s not a flower,” Wilbur says, craning a neck to stare at the newly pressed addition to Tommy’s collection. “That’s a menace designed to make me miserable.”

It *had* given him another stinging rash when he tried to touch the leaves, but still.

“It’s a fucking flower,” Tommy says, scribbling more notes on the page. He’ll run out of pages soon, which might be a problem - Pearl used to make custom journals with clear, sticky sleeves with open sides that made it easy to pull them up, slot flowers into, stick them back in position, and then press to preserve. The right side of the 2 pages is simply a sturdy, pale green sheet perfect for taking notes.

Pearl, however, no longer lives in Sanctuary. Tommy could ask Scott if she left a reserve, or if anyone else in the town is willing to make them, but he has set low expectations for both outcomes. Even Phil doesn’t even know *where* she got the sticky resin that lines the inside of the sleeves, or how she managed some of the trickier book binding techniques these journals require.

“It’s not any flower I’ve ever seen,” Techno comments as he passes by and throws the open book a curious glance.

“Me neither,” Tommy says. “Well, until I saw this one. Found a small field of them on the other side of this mountain.”

“Now that’s a place we don’t go exploring often,” Wilbur says, raising an eyebrow. “What were you doing there?”

Tommy gives him an unimpressed look over the chair between them - him at the living room table, and Wilbur on the couch at the far end of the room, petting Clementine.

“Looking for flowers,” he says.

“Like we look for ants in trees, Wilbur,” Techno says with a vague smugness that signals they’ve definitely had this conversation before.

“Listen, you’ve seen the colonies-”

“None of them are arboreal-bound like you suggested, they just happened to find a good nesting location in the trees-”

“They *have* to exist! You don’t know they don’t!”

“That is the most awful conjecture I have ever heard. The burden of proof is always on the accuser-”

“I know because it would make *evolutionary sense*-”

“They might not live here,” Tommy says.

Wilbur and Techno whip their heads to him in a creepily synchronized movement.



Huh. He wants to learn how to do that.

“Well, not in *this house*, obviously,” Tommy says, making a face back at the face Wilbur is making at him. “But you can’t deny most of the dead stuff ends up on the ground more or less intact around here. It’s a fucking buffet for them. If you want ants that love trees, then find a place where the only good options are trees.”

“...which is most definitely *not* literal mountains and the forests that grow with them-” Wilbur throws his face into his hands with a soft thump and lets out a loud groan.

Techno glances between them, and then shrugs. “Told you we should have focused elsewhere for new species.”

“Haven’t you guys found only 2 unidentified colonies?” Tommy asks.

“Tommy,” Techno says.

“I have at least 2 dozen plants no one else has catalogued yet,” Tommy continues, grinning as he waves the green-covered book in sight. “And I’m not even trying to discover new species.”

“There’s a lot more types of flowers than ants,” Wilbur grumbles. “And we’ve been at this for like a month. Give us a break.”

“Think of all the undiscovered species still waiting to be discovered,” Techno murmurs. “What if, instead of Wilbur’s ridiculous leaf-weaving suggestion, we found ants that drink blood? Or ants that prey only on other ants?”

“And you think *my* suggestions are far-fetched?” Wilbur splutters.

“Mine are no more than yours.”

“I disagree.”

Techno frowns, and then, swivels his head to Tommy.

Oh, fucking great. Here they go.

Tommy tries to pretend he hadn’t seen Techno, but had instead remained incredibly immersed in his observation of the hydrangea specimen.

“Tommy,” Wilbur says. “What’s more unlikely? Ants that nest in leaves, or... blood-sucking ants?”

Tommy enjoys a full 3 seconds of silence before his resolve shatters.

“Blood-sucking bats have been proven to be a real thing,” he finally says. “I don’t see how ants could weave the leaves together, though. So Techno has more of a point.”

Techno makes some triumphant noise, turning to Wilbur with a large grin. Wilbur scowls back.

“We’d have to discover them to prove it,” he says.

“That whole point,” Techno says. “Is that they probably don’t exist.”

“Sounds like a challenge.”

“Wilbur, you are not allowed to domesticate and breed ants until you get a species that fits whatever ridiculous notion you have going on in your head.”

“*Why?*”

“Because it wouldn’t work anyway,” Tommy interrupts. “Most ant species mate in massive flying swarms a few times a year, and you trigger this behavior with nature and rain and shit. Can’t exactly control for generational traits with that.”

“Wait, their mating flights are triggered by environmental factors?” Techno asks. He actually looks taken aback, though his gaze prods at Tommy’s in a way that suggests it’s less about the fact itself and more that Tommy knew it.

Tommy frowns at them. “Yeah. A few flower species spread their spores with ant nuptial flights, so they’ve done a lot of convergent evolution.”

He’s read it in a few books, and even witnessed it from a far distance once, a few months ago. It was kind of fucking scary, to be honest - a swarm almost the size of half of Sanctuary, alive as a moving, angry, probably very horny cloud buzzing over a distant river for several hours. Tommy had eventually settled down and gotten Clementine to fetch him a blanket so he could sit more comfortably.

Of course, he’s usually thought about it in the context of how they spread flower spores, but he hadn’t considered Wilbur and Techno might not have had known from their own angle as well.

“Those books *are* useless,” Techno eventually says. “You were right on that, Wilbur.”

“Yay. Thanks. I feel so appreciated.”

Tommy huffs. “Maybe if you two studied something better, like flowers, you’d have better luck with information.”

“We can study them together!” Wilbur brightens.

“What if, instead of ants that live in trees, we search for ants that live in flowers?” Techno muses.

Oh, great. Here they go again.

Tommy rolls his eyes and goes back to his notes as Wilbur and Techno quickly devolve into more quiet squabbles into the background behind him. After all, this description of the lesser harebell, of which he *finally* found a sample after weeks of searching, isn’t going to write itself.

Though, maybe he could entertain some thoughts about discovering with his brothers as well. Next time they go ant-watching, he should probably tag along.

~\*~

“You know how to sew,” Phil says.

Tommy blinks.

“Yeah?”

Despite how he proclaims evidence of Phil's age from how often he's found with a pair of knitting sticks or a carefully pinched needle and spools of thread, Tommy does indeed know both the techniques and merits to sewing.

"Did you stop?" Phil asks. "Sewing, I mean. I remember you were quite good at it."

"Oh." Tommy frowns. A weighted feeling presses over him, and he finds himself snuggling closer to Phil on the couch to counterbalance. "I... I haven't sewn since November 16th. You know. *That* November 16th?"

"What other could there be?" Phil responds, eyes briefly glazing. But then he shakes his head slightly, and says, "I remember you used to quite like sewing as well."

The question is there. Tommy can deflect with a joke, as he has done in the past, and Phil will shrug and smile and continue onto other things, because he knows Tommy doesn't feel like the time is right yet.

But Tommy is a bit tired of awaiting right times. Adequate with have to do for now.

"I still do," Tommy confesses. "Like sewing. It's just - is there a word for when something you really like get ruined by being put in the context of something else?"

Phil hums for a moment. "I think that's just known as something being ruined by something else."

"Okay," Tommy says. He fiddles around his fingers - quite ironic - and takes a deep breath. "L'Manberg ruined sewing for me."

Phil blinks.

"And Pogtopia," Tommy adds.

"Well - that's not..."

"They ruined a lot of things," Tommy continues. "But sewing was - it was one of the ones I was more upset over, actually. Irrationally. It's like how it was with potatoes."

He still, on some distant level, recoils from the taste of them. Potatoes are now nothing like homely childhood meals he remembers, warm and creamy and flavorful despite their simple palette, a feeling precious that Tommy holds in distant memory. Instead they taste of gravel and soot and something burnt, coppery undertones like blood still leaks from his gums.

They had eaten rarely anything besides potatoes in Pogtopia. And no matter how much Techno swears he had prepared them just as he had when they were all much younger, Tommy cannot distinguish. Maybe his body won't let him distinguish. Even now.

He wishes he could enjoy potatoes as much as he used to again.

It's like his taste buds know the difference, appreciate the well-done sustenance, but all his mind thinks of is harsh, gritty stone and a burning fire, hunting them ever closer.

A look of understanding passes through Phil.

"You sewed a lot of stuff for the wars, didn't you?" he asks.

“Sometimes until my fingers were covered in blood,” Tommy says, leaning back. “But that wasn’t as much Wilbur’s fault. I kept it from him, but I - I was the one mending a lot of soldier uniforms. Especially the underclothes beneath the leather armor we had.”

“L’Manberg’s forces numbered in the thousands,” Phil says. But he just sounds resigned to the fact now. After all, there is no changing the past.

Tommy sighs, scoots even closer, and leans a head on Phil’s shoulder. “Obviously, I couldn’t fix everybody’s. But when I wasn’t on the field, or with Wilbur helping plan whatever new shit he came up with - I was mending stuff. Sewing. Me and Niki were the ones who made the original L’Manberg flag.”

It’s since been replaced, twice - once with the Manberg flag, and now with the New L’Manberg flag, which has an altered pattern. Tubbo had included an illustration of the one which now perpetually hangs from the flagpole just outside the White House.

The old one will be preserved in the museum they’re building, at least. That’s nice.

“And Pogtopia-”

“I did more sewing in Pogtopia,” Tommy says. “Kinda had to. Not much else to it - there weren’t *that* many rebels with us, but we all needed fixed clothes.”

He sighs. “I like sewing. I do. But I - I can’t stop thinking about the wars when I do it. At least when we first got here. I tried once or twice, and then decided to just not pick up a needle again.”

“Do you...” Phil pauses. “You talk like it’s not the case anymore.”

Tommy gives him a rueful smile. “I really don’t know. I haven’t tried it. But I’m definitely not as... gripped, I guess, by the wars anymore.”

He looks away. “I’ve made peace with a lot of things. Potatoes taste slightly better than they used to. Who knows?”

Phil is quiet for a long moment. And then, finally; “do you want to try?”

The offer is exactly what Tommy expected. But for some reason, it throws him off like a rush of thermal wind regardless.

His response, however, is almost laughably simple by comparison.

“Sure.”

He pauses, and adds, “old man.”

~\*~

Clementine is asleep. Snoring. Tail occasionally twitched as she curls paws around morsels of dreams.

That, in it of itself, is fine. The *problem*, however, is that she has decided to fall asleep on a certain cloak which is the last thing Techno had been supposed to pack into bag number 6 for his ender chest.

It's a nondescript dark brown, lighter shades rising up and the occasional white blot, of thin cotton on thin leather and woven of hidden enchantments for the inner layer. To be worn in mildly cold weather.

Techno isn't exactly a face to be welcomed in New L'Manberg, after all, unless he discounts the vast majority of the population who wish to welcome him to the execution block. A cloak alone isn't a great disguise, but coupled with the fact that his face isn't common public knowledge, and with his pink hair pulled back and concealed behind a hood, there will hardly be anyone crying foul.

It's more likely, though not by that much, that Wilbur or Tommy get recognized. Their appearances have changed, both naturally and not, though Techno thinks both their voices are utterly unforgettable.

He may be a biased source.

However. Back to the matter at hand. Which is that he needs to pack away this cloak, and Clementine is currently still, unfortunately, snoring away atop it.

The ship arranged by Tubbo had sent word ahead saying they are expected at the harbor within 4 days. They have some time - but Techno hates to leave a job almost done. This is the last bag. And then all he'll have to do is laze around quipping at Tommy and Wilbur, who will probably both be having rather frantic nights 3 days later.

On the other hand, he's not sure he can move Clementine without waking her. And waking her is definitely off the table.

As if on cue, Clementine releases a loud bark, a paw striking out, but her eyes remain as closed as ever. Her lips curl into a fierce snarl, though made slightly less impressive by the drool slobbered around her.

Drool, slobbered all over his cloak. It's one of a dozen or cloaks Techno uses, but *still*.

He fights down a sigh.

Isn't Wilbur down playing solitaire with Tommy in the ravine? He might as well ask to join.

~\*~

"We can't bring everything in this room," Wilbur says.

"I know," Tommy replies. He shoves another book into his ender chest - Techno divides everything into nice, even, categorized bags. He never saw the appeal. If he knows where it is, why bother organizing it?

"That's good," Wilbur says. Then, his gaze turns slightly disappointed as it falls on the guitar.

Keeping an instrument in the ender chest's near freezing temperatures for extended periods of time is a great way to fuck up an instrument. Tommy knows Techno got around this for his violin with a temperature stabilizer made from magma rocks and something redstone powered, but they have neither the time or knowledge to do that. Techno would take weeks at least to recreate something like that, anyway.

They should have thought to ask sooner. Oh well.

There are guitars in New L'Manberg. Tommy's sure Tubbo won't mind procuring one for Wilbur, even if he might want to punch the ex-president, war criminal, and terrorist extraordinaire first.

"Well. Sucks we can't bring it with us," Tommy sighs. "Gotta find a place to keep it, too."

"It's alright," Wilbur says. "We have *friends*, remember?"

~\*~

"You're trusting me with a lot here," Hbomb says, eyeing the key in his hand.

It's the key to their house, which they had finally installed a proper key-turned lock to a while back.

"If you steal or destroy anything, we could always sue you-"

"We'll spread the word around Sanctuary and completely ruin your reputation and credibility," Tommy chimes in, cutting off Techno. He grins. "Then, we sue you."

"Reassuring," Hbomb deadpans.

Tommy huffs a laugh. The key's just to let him check on the house for damage and occasionally clean up dust. There's really not much else too it.

Techno shuffles a hand in a pocket.

"One more thing," he says. "*The Camarvan*."

There's a pause.

"You want me to take care of *The Camarvan* too?" Hbomb clarifies, head arched curiously.

"It's not made for trans-Oceanic travel," Techno says. "So we'll be taking a different ship."

"Just make sure it doesn't get chewed up by beavers or something," Tommy shrugs.

"Right, right."

"What's that about ships? Has it arrived?" Ranboo's figure grows bigger from behind Hbomb, who steps back from the doorway to allow him more room.

"Not yet," Tommy says. "We're just making sure our stuff doesn't get fucking decked or whatever while we're away."

"Wish I had stuff to return to here," Ranboo sighs, though there's a teasing note to it.

"Maybe one day," Tommy says, because that's about all he *can* say and they both know it.

Ranboo returns a smile. "Wanna help me pack? H hates coming into my room."

"It's full of weird plant parts and cat fur!"

"I'm doing an experiment!"

"That's what you said a month ago with the spoiled milk!"

“*You* literally have a maid outfit you wear so often it’s hung on the wall next to your bed.”

“Hbomb has a maid outfit?” Tommy asks. Techno turns his head away and coughs surreptitiously.

“He has at least 5,” Ranboo says easily. “So. Coming?”

He flattens to the side, and gestures at the open doorway.

“Of course,” Tommy grins.

“I’ll check on Phil and Wilbur,” Techno mutters under his breath.

~\*~

“Honestly, I’m kind of amazed all 5 of them have survived this long,” Scott says as Wilbur lets the last one, Mack, flutter down to his feet. She puffs her chest importantly and struts to join the others in the coop.

“We can take care of animals,” Phil says. “I have quite a lot of experience with that.”

“Phil, most animals under your care have ended up dead,” Wilbur says.

“Death comes for all beings. I can’t control what it takes.”

Wilbur rolls his eyes, and kneels down to pat Soot gently on the head one last time.

And he talks to *Phil* about favoritism. Really.

“Well, take care of them, alright?” Phil says.

“Sure, sure,” Scott says. “They’ll have a wonderful time bullying my own 3 chickens.”

“They’re just built different.” Wilbur shrugs. “Maybe you should give your chickens daily walks up a mountain. Train them.”

“Carrying you down a mountain was enough exercise to last me a lifetime. I’ll pass.”

“He’s got you there, Wilbur.”

“Touché.”

~\*~

“Clementine really, really wants to come with us,” Phil says. “She definitely knows something’s up.”

Tommy kneels down to scratch her behind the ears a few more times. “What does she do?”

“Literally refuses to leave my side,” Phil snorts. “Or any of yours, if she can’t be near me.”

Tommy shares a considering glance with Techno. Originally, the plan had been to let Scott, Hbomb, and whoever else agreed share the responsibilities to take care of her, but...

“She can swim,” Tommy brings up uncertainly. “And she definitely doesn’t have trouble on a ship, or in the ocean.”

“She’s well behaved otherwise,” Techno agrees, and Tommy’s shoulders slump a bit in relief.

“You think we should take her with us?” Wilbur asks, glancing up.

Tommy shrugs. “Sure would give any suspicious green attackers a hell of a fucking surprise.”

~\*~

Much has changed since he first requested an elytra and glided through the forest, but one thing which hasn’t is his love of the wind riding beneath him.

Tommy doesn’t know how many times he has danced through the forest, learned in and out the tight turns and secret passages of each season. First, beneath Phil’s watchful eyes and careful guidance, and then soon on his own, sometimes for hours, for the dawn, for the sheer joy of it.

And no matter how much he enjoys the shades of the forest, hums along to their murmured secrets - it pales in comparison to the open mountain skies.

Tommy loves flying among the mountain peaks. It is that simple. The rush of wind alive, carrying, whistle-sharp like ice-frost honed by falling stars. Cutting through everything, the stillness and life and creeping rot of worries blown away with a streaming flicker.

They’re leaving sometime tomorrow. Tommy’s cloak will stay with him, however, and rockets nestled in a quiver against his belt at all times. If push comes to shove, Tommy will have the skies as his escape.

Today, he has the skies as his playground instead. To be respected, to be explored, but to play with like a partner nonetheless.

Right now he is in the forest; and now he is approaching the cliff’s edge.

The same cliff which Wilbur had once thrown himself off 2 years ago. The same cliff, however, that Tommy has dove off himself numerous times, countless times, until the memories outweigh that one-

Because though they can’t change what happened in the past, they *can* change their reactions to it. And Tommy has long since grown tired of cowering to the darkness of old memories.

The cliff falls away before him. Spread through his world, from here atop the crown of a eagle’s view, there are mountains, are forest waves of green and gold and skyfire orange and the evening redness of the west. Are the stars now just barely peaking down for them.

He has fireworks out of his quiver too, the rockets, specially designed by Phil for elytra flight. There’s 2 of the thin, spiraling red containers held securely in his right hand, They’re there, and ready, though if he times his take off right - and he knows he can, he will - the momentum itself will grant him just as much lift.

A rush of wind blasts him, his body entire and soul rattled, like the force of cold air has whistled harshly into one ear and clean through to the other. Somewhere high above, a pair of eagles screech in unison.

Tommy feels another thrill down his spine.

His moment, indeed.



It's to this moment, and all the moments that have come before for which they have fought so hard, and all the moments that will come after which is the continuous serenity of their resolve.

Tommy closes his eyes, takes a deep breath, and leaps for the stars.

~\*~

The ship is a big creature, plain but sturdy, weathered to the tides. It should serve them well.

"Greetings," the captain says as she takes the final step off the plank and onto sea-bitten pier wood. "My name is Captain Puffy. Glad to be of service."

She turns to Ranboo first, and kneels to a small bow before rising again.

"Um," Ranboo says, looking distinctly caught off-guard. "Thank you for your service?"

Tommy hides a snort, though he hadn't quite been expecting that either.

"And I presume you four are First Lady Ranboo's accompaniment?" Captain Puffy asks, turning to them. A single glance flickers towards Clementine, happily wriggling her entire body around the wood below and occasionally spraying drool onto Techno's pants.

"That would be us, yes," Phil says. His expression is unreadable - deliberately so, which means he's probably hiding a snicker.

Captain Puffy nods. "You may address me as Puffy for short, or Captain. Whichever you prefer. My crew will take a few hours to rest and restock before continuing again, so I will show you around your quarters, and assist First Lady Ranboo with whatever he needs."

"Just showing us our quarters is fine," Ranboo mumbles. "I'd like to retire to them afterwards, preferably with my own company."

"As you wish," Captain Puffy says evenly. Though it's brief and she clearly tries to hide it, Tommy glimpses the almost bewildered look which crosses her face.

"Let's get moving," Techno says briskly. "We can do the rest of introductions later."

Captain Puffy appears almost ready to protest, but then Ranboo gives a nod. Upon that, she simply resumes her previously neutral face and turns to beckon them with stiff movements onto her ship.

Well. They're not exactly starting off on a great foot - but Tommy supposes she hasn't been a dick or anything. They'll have to see. It's not worth being rattled over, however.

After all, there's far more ominous unknowns dawning on the horizon.

## Chapter End Notes

okay, okay. let me explain the First Lady Ranboo thing. normally i wouldn't do this sort of exposition dump in the notes but it's not consequential to the story too much and i cant really infodump in the fic itself

i spend a while thinking about what the spouse of the President of New L'Manberg would be called. given that Ranboo's a man, the most obvious choice would have been First Lord or First Gentleman, or maybe something like First Consort, based off the Prince Consort role like the one Prince Albert held by Queen Victoria of the UK. that last option was quickly crossed out for being too monarchial - not just in based-off origin, and thus association with readers, but because "consort" inherently means that the spouse is there to pass on the monarch's legacy by "consorting", or providing children, so... yeah.

but then i considered that for a President with a female wife, the wife would probably be known as the "First Lady", and that got me thinking about function of the title in the first place.

see, at least in the US, the first lady not only (usually) refers to the president's wife, but also to the person responsible for hosting the White House and all its social functions. similar to how it is in the US (though how true this is irl in function is very debatable. it used to be more important in ye olden days), the President's spouse in New L'Manberg, based off the traditions of the place's previous governors, is not just there to look pretty. their job is to oversee and organize any gatherings, social meetings and events, and generally keep order in the house - the "White House". they are the host for guests and responsible for the gears that keep the White House as a functioning cog in the governmental order - they command the servants, decide how to organize rooms, and tour and accompany visitors. even political opponents count as visitors.

this brings the idea that "First Lady" isn't just a fancy name given to a president's wife - the "lady" part is a societal designation for the person who takes care of that part of the household. this means that it can, indeed, correctly refer to a man if the man serves that function for the household (in this case the household is the White House). the "first" designation is because Ranboo's the president's spouse, and so considered the most important - hence, "first" - lady in the nation.

is this still assigning roles and expectations to marriage, just instead of gender, it's just based off social class and perceived job status instead? yes. is it unfair and damaging and kind of derogatory? yes. that's worldbuilding societies for you.

basically, what this means is that "First Lady" in New L'Manberg doesn't mean "wife of president," and no one is trying to misgender Ranboo or anything. they're simply calling him by what they perceive to be his assigned title, in the same way they call his husband President Tubbo because Tubbo is president, so President is his designation as a result. and just as the President is the overseer of the country, the First Lady is the host/hostess of the White House, and they should be called as such. calling him just "Ranboo" would be, to the New L'Manberg citizen, like Puffy, like an English person calling Queen Elizabeth just "Elizabeth". to her face. it's a big no no and would be really disrespectful.

this worldbuilding detail stems from the idea that gay marriage is (somewhat) normalized in both Hypixel and New L'Manberg, though historically for different reasons. In New L'Manberg specifically, gay marriage and the adoption of children is considered an acceptable way to continue a family's legacy and pass on inheritance, as there is less emphasis on biological bloodline and more emphasis on the passing of a family's history, values, customs, and the continued maintenance of their property/land. it means that if a gay marriage would result in a couple more able to further that legacy, compared to a match with someone of the opposite gender, it would be considered alright to go through with it.

however, expected marriage roles still arise because it's much more taboo to disrupt a family's legacy and property and values, and uniting two completely different families together with

blending of their traditions would be considered a major, major disruption, even if economic alliances are common. instead, a marriage always means one person is leaving their family, detaching themselves from them, to join another family - and that person, specifically, will take on the role of the “lady” of the household, and be expected to preform the aforementioned duties that come with it. if it sounds like that person will also be in a lower position of power and more susceptible to suffer abuse, that’s because it’s true.

(continuation in comment section because im reaching the character limit for the notes section)

# the fairest of them all

## Chapter Notes

60 chapters pog. fuck remember when i thought this would be over by 50 chapters? good times.  
[discord](#) here, as always

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“It hasn’t actually been that long, has it?” Techno murmurs. “Overall. Since this journey’s last been made.”

“We’re young yet,” Wilbur hums in reply. He takes the final step, and joins his brother against the ship’s railings.

*The Flock*, Puffy had called this vessel - and certainly, its volume sails as a unison body through the lightening waters. Like a force of travel bearing upon all in its path, adapting to the current, locked onto a destination distant, not seen but felt ever so clearly all the same.

The skies are cloud-wound today, and the wind brushes cold. Not as cold as it would have been back on the mountains surrounding Sanctuary, however - they’ve been steadily southward bound for the past week.

“It feels like longer,” Techno says. His gaze turns from the waters for a moment, to rest upon Wilbur’s. Wilbur responds in kind, meeting his brother’s eyes, red like the dawning of blood moons.

“Of course it does,” Wilbur says softly. “We’re still not used to it. Not really.”

His lip quirks up. “Don’t worry. You’ll start feeling like an old man soon enough.”

“Compared to Phil, I suppose,” Techno chuckles.

“He’ll throw a fit, but then find a way.”

“He always finds a way in the end.”

“Really? *The End*? End, End?”

Techno shoves Wilbur lightly. “Shut up. You know what I mean.”

Wilbur laughs, and shrugs away to flop against the railing again.

A spray of water clashes over, blinging Techno’s pink hair into a nest of shining droplets, reflecting rainbows like tiny jeweled prisms.

Techno would look quite good with beads of jewels woven through his hair, actually. It would suit most people, of course, but especially him. Maybe it’s partially a piglin thing too - don’t they have a thing for jewelry?

Not that humans can complain about that particular attraction either.

It's rather funny, actually. Now that Techno doesn't present to emit an aura of wrought terror wherever he goes, Wilbur catches several of Puffy's crew members - some women and a few of the men as well - nervously shuffling as they try to work up the courage to make conversation with him.

Tracking down a few revealed they had been scared of their company being rejected. Because apparently, Techno is "alluring" enough for someone to be scared of that. Long pink hair, pale and pearly skin, deep red eyes and tall, elegant frame - Wilbur supposes it would make sense.

And he finds it deeply, deeply amusing that Techno now inspires a very different kind of terror. Techno certainly didn't think so after Wilbur had informed him of this, however.

It's just as well that Techno has no interest in romantic relationships - none of them do, really. Wilbur's maimed leg makes him far less attractive to the sailor types, which he's still pouting about a bit internally. But it does mean he spends far less time fending off his suitors than before, back when getting in the pockets of New L'Manberg's general and later President was apparently the newest trend for the unwedded young adult.

Techno's too socially awkward to be firm about anything when he's not threatening people, however, so Wilbur ironically says no to more people for him than for himself.

It makes him wonder how Techno would fare in piglin culture. As a social outcast? A curiosity to be poked like a foreign animal? Or as a relatively normal, albeit lesser citizen, like Techno is treated here, at least with the more tolerant nations?

Probably differs by culture as well, Wilbur would guess, and maybe who his mother was. Apparently, that's also a big deal in most piglin cultures.

Wilbur vaguely recalls that Techno had mentioned his biological mother, once, a piglin from some Nether nation. The few memories Techno has of her are hazy and undefined, but he had told of remembering gold (unsurprising), walls of blackstones and paintings (still unsurprising), and apparently the warmth of being cradled in her arms.

That last one is more surprising. Wilbur has vague memories of his parents as well, enough to know they had probably cared for him to at least some degree. He knows he was held, was cradled and pressed against a chest.

They're dead, though. He knows that much - even remembers a flash of blood and flesh gored to shreds. He was at an orphanage for a while after, and then-

And then he met Phil.

Techno, who was born in the Nether, guesses he was cast out through a portal one day; and that was that. Not that he was old enough to remember the details of why.

He had confided in Wilbur once, when they were far younger and whispering childish conspiracies behind Phil's back, that he thinks he could probably find his mother again if he really tried. Or at least, that she would recognize him, if only because there are only so many piglin hybrids in the worlds.

Every hybrid shows a different combination of traits from their parents. Techno's tusks are small, almost able to be mistaken for long fangs if it isn't for the fact that they're curved the opposite way. Some piglin hybrids don't even have tusks. Wilbur certainly doesn't know any with hair as pale and

silky pink as Techno's, though of course most piglin hybrids don't grow their hair as long as Techno's either.

Point is, there's a lot they don't know.

Speaking of which.

"You think we'll ever find out what's going on with Tommy?" Wilbur says.

"I still think you and Phil are basing this off speculation," Techno rolls his eyes. He pauses. "But if anyone does figure it out, it'll probably be Tommy himself. He's run the ideas by us, and they're pretty solid, remember?"

"Hm." Wilbur stretches his shoulders back, and takes in the sharp sea air. Tommy knows to be careful.

Hopefully, something interesting turns up.

~\*~

When they last crossed this ocean, it had mainly been by elytra.

There hadn't been time for dalliance among the air currents, unique and captivating as they are above a geography so different - but upon this reflection, Phil realizes they *had* had the time. Nothing stopped them from breaking formation and taking slow dances with the world, beyond a passing concern for the coming winter that Phil could have just as easily avoided by bunkering southward for the season.

They had simply deluded themselves into thinking otherwise. The pressures of time weighted heavy on their mind - Wilbur and Tommy from the wars, presumably, and Phil from the already mounting sense of failure from having not reached them sooner.

And Techno has always had timers ticking above him head, ever present, like hundreds of clamoring voices demanding more blood, more sacrifice, more spectacle-

His sons' lives have been spectacle for long enough. Even to Phil.

Tommy hadn't had a fun time then, back when they made the (now looking back, rather wonky and ill-planned journey) to Novixl. He later admitted to Phil it had been more of attitude than anything else, still dragged with an unwillingness to see past everything that had happened back in L'Manberg.

Phil's seen him enjoy the wind and air now, though, blot of paleness in the sky, gliding unfurled. Sometimes he joins Tommy as well, and they simply coast the currents together as the ship does with the waters below.

Not today. Tommy is in his chambers, with Ranboo, the two up to gods-know-what. Phil soars a few minutes longer, enjoys the cool combing of his feathers, and then swoops down to click heels with the ship's deck.

It's night, dark. There is a singular crew member on the crow's nest, keeping watch, but he is used to Phil and Tommy's flights. Of course, he thinks of elytras for both of them - Phil takes off at the far end of the ship, blends near-seamlessly into the darkness, and always remains too high to observe detail of.

Captain Puffy, and her crew, have been sworn to secrecy. If they don't give away Ranboo, they won't give away his escorts. Traitors are near non-existent in this kind of escort profession - after all, it requires the building of years of trust, and comes with both a hefty pay - for both the service, and betrayal.

No one likes hiring traitors.

Phil tugs his cloak over his shoulders again - Tubbo knows about him, Tommy having told his childhood friend long ago, and both Tubbo and Niki having lived near them briefly once; but there is no need to spread the knowledge that he has true wings dark as void. Touched by void, really, like all End avians do.

Most people who glimpse the appendages will simply assume he is a rare hybrid or creature they simply do not know of, or perhaps has a strange mutation in the expression of songbird hybrid traits. But there is always the chance someone more learned might recognize him as an End avian, which would bring up a host of questions - namely, around their supposedly extinct status - that Phil does not care to answer.

Having made sure his cloak is secure, Phil descends down the stairs leading into the passenger's quarters.

He doesn't get very far before a chance meeting stops him.

"Captain Puffy," Phil says, nodding. "Good evening."

"It is long past evening, Phil," Captain Puffy says. Her face remains straight-laced. Phil actually has trouble deciphering whether she simply accepts at face value Phil's claim that his name is Phil and nothing more - most certainly not, for example, something closer to Philza Minecraft, Angel of Death, or anything - or thinks it is complete and utter bullshit.

She somehow appears even less amused tonight. Phil supposes that's fair - he is, after all, an unknown factor now caught sneaking around her ship in the middle of the night. Suspicious, indeed.

There's not much to be done about that. Phil gives her a smile and shrugs. "Good night, then. I was just heading to bed."

"What were you doing out so late?" Captain Puffy asks. Her eyebrow arches, just slightly.

"Watching the stars," Phil says simply. It's not a lie, though not the whole truth. He rarely gives out whole truths to anyone not his family.

To his mild surprise, Captain Puffy seems to relax slightly at his statement.

"They *are* beautiful, aren't they?" she says. "A sailor's greatest companions - besides their fellow crewmates, of course. But there are no things in the worlds as reliable as the stars."

"That is true," Phil says, nodding. It is a sailor's truth, after all. And among a great many other things, Philza Minecraft is a sailor. "Were you perhaps planning to stargaze as well?"

"I still am," Captain Puffy says, now giving him a small smile back. "The sky is clear tonight."

Phil considers his options for a moment, hesitancy lingering him on the edge-

*"There's more to you than your place in the world," Techno says, meaning it for all of them.*

Ah, fuck it.

“My sleep schedule’s shot anyway,” Phil says. “So I suppose I’ll watch the night with you a while longer.”

~\*~

There are no stars in the End.

While Phil has long since grown used to their presence in the Overworld, the mystical sense of wonder they struck him with when he had first gazed upon a sky just as black but so much brighter never really faded. In a way, it has carried him through this entire world, and even further beyond.

It’s been a while since he’s simply sat down and enjoyed them.

“They have different ones in Pyserne,” Captain Puffy says. There’s a hint of wistfulness to her voice, but it lacks the deep yearning some might hold for a homeland. Those people typically don’t fare well for long sea voyages, Phil knows.

“I’ve seen,” Phil says. “I had a book detailing the stars from different points of the world, once. Then I lost it.”

A rather unfortunate encounter with a tornado; he winces at the memory. There’s a reason few people, even the most experienced and prepared of adventurers, bother to journey past the Western Mountains of Novixl.

“Ah,” Captain Puffy says. “That’s... rather sad. All that work. You must be well traveled.”

Phil shrugs, letting his body slide further against the railing. “I’ll continue to be well traveled some day. Eventually, I’ll replace it. Will probably do a better job drawing next time too.”

Tommy would like to help him with that, as well as Techno and Wilbur. Maybe they could make it a joint effort.

“You must have a lot of experience if you’re so confident in your ability.”

“Tubbo - sorry, *President* Tubbo - entrusts us with Ranboo for a reason,” Phil says. “Granted, part of that reason is because he isn’t exactly brimming with viable options - but we know what we’re doing.”

“You are the only one who has bothered to introduce yourself.” Captain Puffy rolls her eyes. “The other three avoid me.”

Wilbur and Tommy do so to decrease the likelihood of being recognized, probably, which is higher around a more influential ship captain of New L’Manberg like Puffy - and Techno simply because he detests making conversation with new people.

“You won’t have to see us again after we arrive at L’Manberg,” Phil says. Thankfully, the city is only around a dozen miles inland of the ocean and connected via river. Arranging land transportation would have made things rather more complicated.

Though they use a different measurement system for distances of water over there, don’t they? Miles originated from Beastire, but most of northwest Pyserne uses nauticals. Phil doesn’t remember the conversation rate; only that it is something inane.



“I *will* be seeing First Lady Ranboo rather much, though,” Captain Puffy says.

She bristles slightly as Phil tamps down a snort. “What?”

“It’s the way you say ‘*First Lady Ranboo*,’” Phil says. “Sorry. I have a bit of trouble imagining Ranboo in such a role.”

“You’ve been with him during his absence, right?” Captain Puffy asks.

“More or less, yes.”

She relaxes again. “He is young, of course, and I do feel quite a bit of sympathy for the poor man. But nonetheless, that’s who he is.”

“Yeah,” Phil hums. “Let’s hope it doesn’t stay that way *too* long.”

“You think he might break under it?” Captain Puffy asks. “I have seen it before. People who shouldn’t have been given certain responsibilities... it’s not a pretty sight, what some of them are reduced to.”

The impersonal way she presents the opportunity has Phil hiding a wince. But she doesn’t know Ranboo on any personal level, really, and she’s bringing up a valid point - and so Phil answers.

“No. I think he’s strong enough.” Phil exhales. “But just because someone *can* handle something doesn’t mean they should have to, you know?”

“No one should be made to handle certain responsibilities,” Captain Puffy responds. “But it’s the way of the world that it happens regardless. If not Ranboo, then some other soul.”

She tilts her head to the stars again. “It happens too often. Makes me glad for the lot I got in life. I’m happy with the ship and seas and stars, even if it’s not always easy taking on missions so important. More than can be said for most people.”

“Right,” Phil says, and leans to enjoy the glittering night sky again as well.

After all, despite everything, they’re happy and they’re safe. That’s a far better outcome than could have been, but was and will never be.

~\*~

*“I think I’ve made my choice...*

*I’m a deceased playing victim,*

*Slip the face, slip the victory-”*

“Your songs are just as depressing as they were before,” Techno interrupts - normally, he wouldn’t, but it’s the 16th time Wilbur has practiced the notes of this one now and it’s getting a little tiring to hear. Even Clementine has long since fallen asleep at his feet, beneath the desk and chair.

“They’re the fun type of depressing though,” Wilbur says, shooting him a grin, though keeping his voice the same previous levels of soft subduedness. “They tell a story! They’re dramatic! Don’t you love dramatic tragedies?”

“Don’t remind me,” Techno sighs. He’d be concerned, if it isn’t for the fact that Wilbur has always, for as long as he can remember, loved telling stories. Silly stories, dramatic stories - and indeed, tragic stories. It’s a return to normalcy, if anything, keeping them confined to song and acting instead of attempting to turn those visions into reality.

He collapses his head onto the half-filled page before him, deciding enough words have been spent for the day. A furry presence shifts beside his leg - and then a small bark. Clementine has woken up from her nap, then.

And now she’s playing tug with his trousers. Great.

Maybe he’ll go up to watch the pod of dolphins that have been trailing the ship for a few days now, brave the stares of the crew members to sneak in a few more observations about dolphin behavior before they part ways. Marine biology is far too understudied compared to its terrestrial counterpart.

Of course, Wilbur will drag him to the mess hall to rate his performance of his songs later tonight, so there will be awkward stares regardless. Sanctuary had gotten used to Techno’s presence relatively soon, most likely due to the already high number of people with unusual biology living within it - so despite having not put on his skull mask for nearly 2 years, Techno is still unused to this entirely new kind of attention.

It’s not just people who think he’s attractive, or whatever nonsense Wilbur’s gotten into his head. Nether hybrids are rare in general, and the majority are from Novixl. The people there generally see at least a few in their lifetimes, even for those families for whom generations have born, lived, and died in the same small village.

Captain Puffy’s crew, from Pyserne, are likely far less used to the presence of someone like him. Especially since, as Techno has gathered from stray conversation, their usual job of relaying important information and transporting important people or items leaves them little need to actually leave the ship decks and investigate their destinations.

New L’Manberg is relatively accepting of hybrids - but only *their* types of hybrids, after all. The types they know, the types they’re familiar with. Everything Techno is not.

There is no cultural norm for how to process someone like him.

It’s a small matter. Visitors from Novixl are increasingly common these days - and few people would be stupid enough to stop and question random people they see passing by on the streets based off a tiny hunch.

Techno drains his teacup and, making up his mind, rises from his seat to head for the upper decks and observe the dolphins. Clementine raises her head from her paws, blinking. Then, releasing his trousers from her teeth, she quickly scrambles up to follow him.

~\*~

“I didn’t know you could read.”

“Very funny,” Ranboo snorts. But he kicks out the spare chair beneath the desk, and Tommy saunters over to collapse onto it. The cushions are softer than even he is used to, which is saying something, because he’s used to Phil’s wealth buying them practically any comfort.

There's even a jukebox in Ranboo's room. Which is rather unfair, because Tommy doesn't have a jukebox in *his* room.

He already has one stored in his ender chest anyway, but that's not the point.

Though he might as well take advantage of this one. Tommy reaches into a pocket and carefully pulls out *Cat*.

He doubts he'll ever get the original discs he found back. But even if he loses *this* disc, Phil will find a way to obtain him a replacement anyway.

With a slightly dramatic, floppy sigh, he strains out and slides the disc into the jukebox just within reach. *Cat* winds into sound, low and bouncy, like smooth bubbles cruising along dark oceans.

"Long day?" Ranboo asks, turning to him.

"Captain Puffy finally caught me." Tommy throws out his arms dramatically. "Wanted to ask me some questions about how we knew you."

"And what disaster did you initiate?"

"Hey!" Tommy kicks Ranboo's legs from beneath the table. "Why'd you assume it was me?"

"So you admit something happened."

Tommy huffs, rolling his eyes. There's no winning with Ranboo, really - somehow, he has the uncanny ability to make almost anyone and anything look and sound bad if he wants to.

Besides Wilbur and Techno. They are, apparently, on a different kind of level as well.

"Once I realized, I flipped her off and came here," Tommy grumbles. "She won't come looking this way - too worried about 'intruding' on the beloved First Lady or something."

"She's trying to do her job by making sure I'm in safe company," Ranboo says. "You have to admit you and your family look incredibly suspicious. The only reason you guys are escorting me is because you have personal ties to Tubbo."

"We're doing our job, aren't we?" Tommy pats Ranboo's shoulder. "People would have to fight their way past Techno and Phil to stop you from reaching the White House safely."

"Yeah, yeah," Ranboo says. He taps his chin thoughtfully, leaning back into his chair. "You know, for a while I considered this plan where we faked a kidnapping for me, so there's actual plausible deniability for why I'm gone. Right now the excuse is that I'm taking a break for my failing, fragile health."

"You're definitely not failing or fragile," Tommy snorts. He frowns. "The White House has already split your duties between other members, right? While you were gone?"

"Yeah," Ranboo says. "The heads of staff really deserve a raise, from what Tubbo tells me."

He sighs, and then gestures at the book on the tables. "These are the notes I originally took about my expected duties at the White House. I figured now's a good time to refamiliarize myself with them."

"Can you remember?" Tommy asks, genuinely curious. "I know you still have memory troubles."

“They’ve gotten a lot better, but - yeah, I still forget sometimes.” Ranboo shrugs. “I’ve got my memory book and I’ve got the notes. Tubbo’s also said stuff about having me see some doctors about it. We’ll work it out, I guess.”

Tommy stares at the scrawl of words on the notebook, detailing information, some of which he recognizes - *3 7 regions for New L’Manberg, Notfound Strip is contested territory, keep track of new names for victims of Nov 16th to confirm and add to the memorial-*

*And some of which he has never heard of - main flag outside White House is raised an hour before dawn, rest are raised hour after; all are taken down after 16th hour, give weekly ceremonial speech about national unity after the first stars appear, if cloudy then don’t do speech, the number of times bells ring at moonrise say how many hours Parliament was in session, so always make sure to know where the scribes are and find time to talk to them, the tune the bell plays before depends on wind directions along the river so always keep track of the messengers who figure that out, and Parliament is in session 6 days a week unless they do a recess which they do every once in a while when the members feel like it or are making another political statement-*

Actually, that last part he’s familiar with; though he wishes he isn’t.

“Yeah,” Tommy says quietly. “You’re a better man than me, Ranboo. You’ll work it out.”

The music of *Cat* bubbles on.

~\*~

*Greetings, Tubbo*

*I know it has been a while since my last letter, but this will be the final before our meeting anyways.*

*As of now, New L’Manberg is still 2 weeks away - we may or may not arrive to witness the signing of the peace treaty with the Dream SMP. Given all you’ve told me about the preparations being made to make this a great public event, hopefully we arrive sooner than later. I really want to try the crab cakes again, since only New L’Manberg’s people seem to know how to make them right.*

*I just want to try all the food stalls in general again, actually. I kind of miss wandering the streets, chatting to people - about normal stuff, not national affairs - and buying snacks to eat. The snacks were probably the least stressful part of my time as a politician.*

*Despite how much I wish it isn’t true, you know that I have a proclivity for seafood, just like Wilbur. And damn, does New L’Manberg’s people have good seafood.*

*It’s good that we’ll be entering New L’Manberg while the nation’s in a celebratory spirit. Less dangerous that way. It’ll increase spending and stimulate the economy or some shit too, which should create less headaches for you.*

*If we make it in time, Ranboo will probably join you in the public signing ceremony. He knows his support would be invaluable there. So, let the guards you arrange know that. Me and my family will be in the crowd, though.*

*In any case, Dream will be in the capital the same time we are. That’s actually quite convenient - if anything happens, you can reasonably block his exit and the SMP probably won’t even complain that much. That’s what he gets for being such a fucking idiot.*

*No, I am not planning anything. I am very smart and reasonable and a Big Man would definitely not do anything stupid.*

*It's not stupid. Ranboo agrees with me.*

*Actually, Ranboo sort of does not agree with me, but his opinion doesn't count. He's only 9/10 on the husband rating scale, remember?*

*You just need to arrange what I told you to. Don't worry, I'll make sure it doesn't affect you. I'll be careful. Very careful. That's a promise, Tubbo. The best laid plans go awry - but that's why you have contingencies, right? I'll tell you more when we finally meet again.*

*New L'Manberg may be your country, but don't forget that we built L'Manberg together. That still means something to me, Tubbo, just as it does to you.*

*I miss you a lot. Thanks for being such a great friend, and I'm sorry I can't do more to help you.*

*Will see you again very soon.*

*Take care,*

*Tommy.*

~\*~

There are a lot of people who would like him dead in New L'Manberg.

Wilbur cares not for the indistinct faces, those hungry for his justice. But Tubbo's Cabinet, and the Parliament at large, contains many who are familiar.

What little new personal details he knows now of Fundy and Niki comes from mentions of them by Tubbo, in his letters to Tommy. News of Eret is near non-existent, with how distant the Dream SMP's capital, Essempy, is - in the very inner reaches of Pyserne, far from the coasts where news spreads more readily.

He would like to... if not make amends, then resolve their conflicts somehow. But how does he resolve conflicts with people who aren't there?

He doesn't. He can't. He can't presume anything for them, can only think and speculate and plan away without any foresight. Wilbur has his plan straightened - apologize, explain, assure them he won't intrude on their lives any further - but beyond that is all murky haze.

Is it fear which curls within his heart? Wilbur doesn't think he should be fearing this. He has nothing to fear, really. Rejection, he is used to, is almost expecting - for while his family's love for him is near unconditional, Fundy and Niki still run the country he committed mass terrorism upon.

Not exactly a forgivable crime, by any means. He's not fooled - if Phil had not squirreled him away in the direct aftermath, amongst the smoke and confusion and still shattering rubble, he would have likely ended up on the execution block. Tubbo, Fundy, Niki, and the others would watch - and while they might not have wanted his death, they would not have tried to stop it either, unless they themselves would be accused a traitorous conspirator and join him.

Tommy would have tried to stop the execution, and he would have failed. That's a reason, though not those only on, why Wilbur had planned to die with the explosion - he couldn't have risked Tommy trying to free him and ending up with an axe above his head as well, so he couldn't let himself survive to that point.

Phil arriving had been quite the shock. Asking him to stab Wilbur had been quite the impromptu decision. One he regrets daily.

Maybe he wouldn't have died, though, even if Phil hadn't showed up. Techno would have tried to stop his execution - he might have succeeded, or he might have not, against an entire nation and furious army of thousands.

Well. The point is that Phil *did* show up. Like he always promised he would. Like he always will.

Wilbur had spent much time envisioning death scenarios in the weeks before the final battle of Manberg. Too much time, and not enough on anything else. It had been all about the story, back then.

That's one of the first things he should apologize for. If his former friends, former allies, and former family say his head should be spiked on the public square - well, he won't agree with them, and he certainly wouldn't let them - but he concedes to the point.

Wilbur knows he has broken far, far more exceptions than what is normal. Phil really is his father, in so many more ways than one.

And they don't even know he survived the explosion.

~\*~

Tommy isn't keeping track of the days, but the sky is gray-blue and beautifully clear when Wilbur limps to his side, coats an arm against the ship's railing, as says; "I see land."

## Chapter End Notes

okay. i dont think i ever addressed this, but, like,,, techno doesn't have voices in his head. I mean, after 60 chapters its pretty obvious by now, but i dont think i ever saw a comment bring it up either, which surprises me

this fic was begun before techno introduced that plot point. thats the reason. there you go. in case anyone got curious.

even if i had begun the fic after techno introduced the voices, though, i still dont think i would have included that character trait. this fic is, among other things, about characters learning to take agency for their own actions and the voices would have spectacularly fucked up techno's character arc (and some of my worldbuilding) in many, many ways. just,,, tore a giant bulldozer through it all.

good thing this entire fic just took every canon element introduced post november 16 and chucked it out the window amirite.

except for the bits which would give interesting narrative perspectives. those get juxtaposed instead (glances at ghostbur)

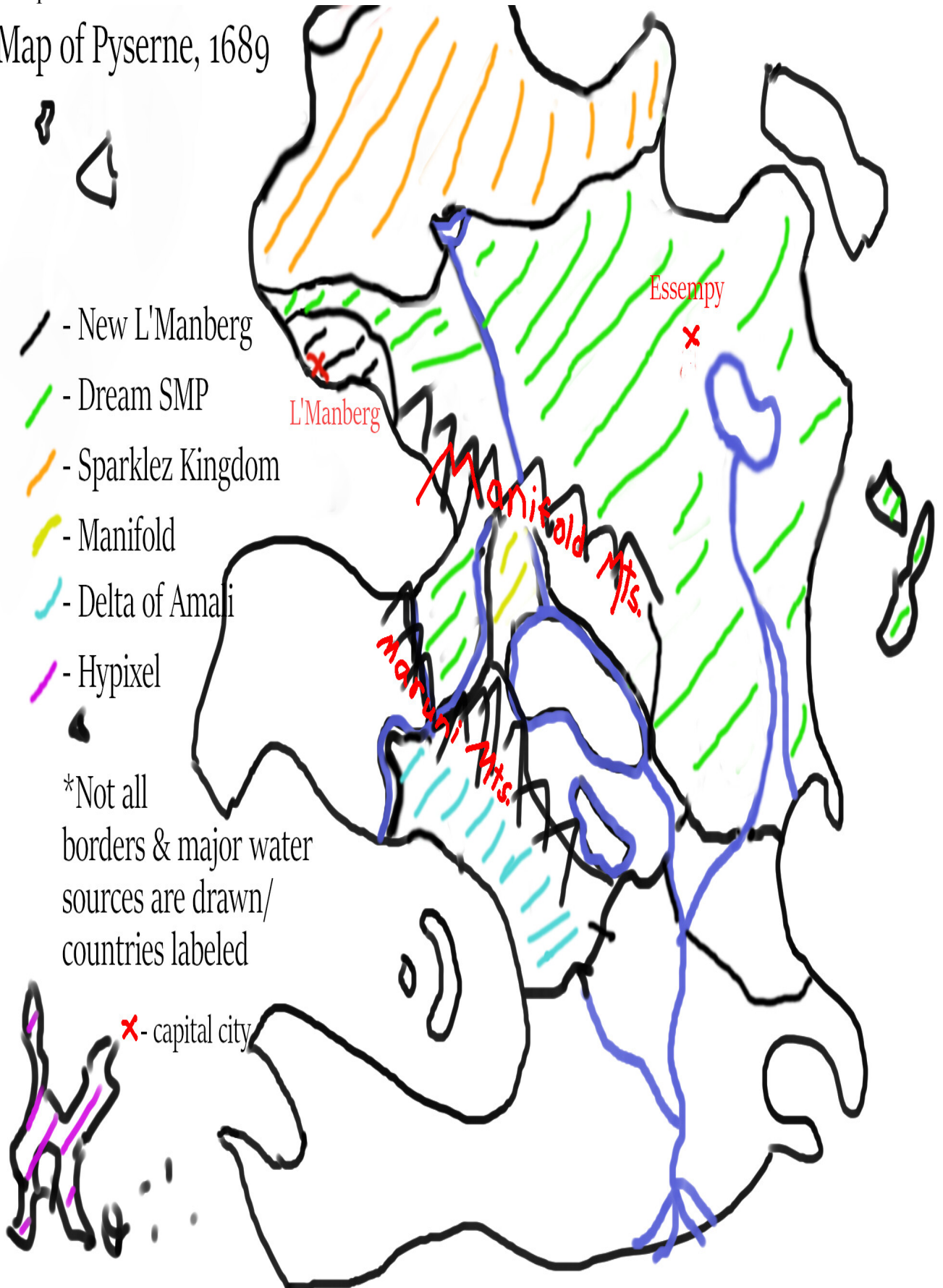
by the way, i have a special project im working on that i'll release after this fic is done. this is one of the things i've created as part of that project, and i figure i might as well share it here now, since i know so many of y'all love the worldbuilding-

# Map of Pyserne, 1689

- New L'Manberg
- Dream SMP
- Sparklez Kingdom
- Manifold
- Delta of Amali
- Hypixel

\*Not all borders & major water sources are drawn/  
countries labeled

✕ - capital city





# thought when i get older

## Chapter Notes

sorry for the delay in updates, but this is nearly 6k words and required quite a bit of research. im 3k into the next chapter already and its like halfway done so we'll see when that comes out (hopefully tomorrow or as part of a double update the day after)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The windswept, sun caught, marble and stone foundationed city of L'Manberg, capital of the nation of New L'Manberg, once sprawled itself across the shallow valleys carved by the Scription River, which carries the lifeblood of the city, and region as a whole, from inland out to Pysernic Ocean and back.

There are posts and checks and business-related buildings all along the river on the way to L'Manberg proper, warehouses and unloading docks and guards ready to document the passage of vessels. Captain Puffy's ship, *The Flock*, bypasses them all with a single wax-signed, bronze-edged document and her own word of assurance.

It's more the latter part which counts, Wilbur thinks. It's far harder to forge a person than a document, and they've most certainly been briefed of her expected return.

The scars of November 16th are not as visible here. The black-veined trees, the addition of barns and fenced grazing space, how the cup of tea besides the guard who leans through the toll window to confirm identities with Captain Puffy clearly has milk-swirled patterns. Small things.

There are some not so small things as well. Such as the many, many hastily constructed and now abandoned shelters, most wood and some dug directly into the hillside, which cram swathes of the landscape.

Then they sail into New L'Manberg's harbor - and that is the first true indication.

For L'Manberg's ocean trade, ships harbor in... well, the ocean harbor. The one they had just passed. There isn't enough room for all the merchant ships to sail up river and anchor closer to the city, so the largest ones offload their cargo onto the docks reaching into the sea, and smaller ones sail deeper along the wide channel of the Scription River.

Though the people have progressively enlarged the coasts of the waters to store smaller, private ships, and there had once been talks of digging canals to create an entire moat around the city, for the most part foreign commercial activity happens in the large outposts and buildings closer to the ocean shores, while the more protected city proper lays further inland.

Wilbur knows, with how fast the place has been growing in the past few decades and especially recently, it's only a matter of time before the city properly stretches from its current center all the way down to the coast. But another factor will speed up this process further than it already was.

More specifically, *his* factor. With the explosives.

Tommy had told him, and sure, he knows how rebuilding works - but he hadn't imagined it would be on a scale like... *this*.

Nearly every inch he can see, where there should be ground and smooth pavement and bustling roads like Beastire, there is instead water. Rippling calmly, glided through, rising and falling like tides of their own, the carriages which had once been so common replaced by narrow canoes.

Whereas once, visitors would step onto the far docks and walk or ride on horseback into the city, now they pass rows upon rows of canoes guarded by a few maintenance people, ready to be rented out.

"Oh, it's good to see the dam project went alright," Ranboo says, stepping up beside him as *The Flock* slowly glides its not huge, but still comparatively weighty presence deeper into what could only be described as a lake of a city. Most ships row in lines to form lanes and streets imagined, though not very straight ones. Stationary canoes with people in bright uniforms call directions with flags and shouts, managing the traffic.

Their lane of managed traffic cuts through the middle of the lake, though Wilbur finds it difficult to glimpse land on either side with everything in the way - logs, buildings, other ships. There are other lines of smaller passenger ships and boats and canoes, going between and below massive wooden stilts, sides often painted and bannered with flags and advertisements - when he first sees the latter, Wilbur snorts. Some things, at least, never change.

"Dam project?" Wilbur manages to ask, still encapsulated by the sheer *scope* of transformation L'Manberg has undergone.

It's like the entirety of the ground has fallen away, leaving each building suspended in the air all on their own, dangled like marionettes - and then the stage had been flooded with water and the puppets left to find stability in the formless sea.

Most of them are on the stilts - massive logs of wood overlaid with planks, and the structures rebuilt atop them, a few feet above the waterline. Upon closer inspection, he sees that while most of the houses and shops and other various buildings are painted bright whites and yellows and greens and reds, they are constructed almost entirely of wood as well.

L'Manberg, once so famous for their arches of marble and stonework, the city inner paved entirely and solid foundations centuries old, now constructs itself over a lake submerging the very same of ruin and rubble.

*The Flock* is now reaching the administrative heart of the city, and Wilbur recognizes several recreations of buildings he once knew - for one, the Schlatt Bank, named after an ancestor of J. Schlatt's who had started the businesses which transformed their family into an economic tycoon. High profile shops and the central public library stand with bold colors and bannered flairs, carved in the same styles they had held before, but their presence on the wooden stilts and platforms tells Wilbur they had been almost entirely rebuilt as well.

"There was a problem with Scripion River's flow disrupting the waters too much for smaller vessels to travel the lake easily," Ranboo says. "The solution was - well, everyone calls it the dam project because it's partially about building a dam further upriver. But the more immediate part's actually making the lake bigger to spread the force of the flow more evenly."

"But that means..." Wilbur frowns, and peers deeper into the water. "Most of the old city is below us, right?"

“Yeah. The deepness varies a lot, obviously - we created some islands and dug out other areas. It’s partially why ship traffic is directed - we don’t want the larger ships scraping into parts of the stone rubble where the water level isn’t deep enough.” Ranboo shifts. “Um, they actually made the decision to detonate more TNT so there’s more depth in general. And expand the lake size. So, uh, most of the city is built above the water now.”

“Tubbo explained the whole reasoning they had once,” Tommy chimes up, sliding to Wilbur’s side. “Since you completely leveled the foundations of the city instead of just destroying some buildings, they couldn’t rebuild without stable land. And the withers made agriculture a bit difficult. So, in his words, ‘we might as well turn the half-crater into a full crater, flood it, and build on stilts since the only thing we have in supply is wood anyway.’”

“It was basically the only way they could think of to make the city inhabitable again,” Ranboo adds. “In the short term, anyway.”

He nods towards a row of what appears to be small trees in the water, acting as almost a barrier to guide the traffic lines of ships. But instead of roots buried into ground, the trees’ upper tendrils flare in a raised circle around themselves like a puffed out dress, and the lower ones reach to grip onto something below the water Wilbur can not see clearly, but knows is probably raised mounds of earth.

Their leaves are dark green, splotted with black. The trunks twist and arch, similarly dark. And upon further inspection, Wilbur realizes they’re everywhere - and planted deliberately so.

“Mangrove trees,” Ranboo explains. “They’re really good at sucking traces of wither from the water, and they keep the ground the stilts stand on more solid. We might even be able to stop adding milk to everything we eat within the next 20 years.”

“Interesting,” Wilbur says. Techno would probably love to come back then, and fully study the city’s transformation.

He’s heard of towns built on lakes before, but nothing quite on this scale, absolutely nothing with L’Manberg’s set of circumstances.

Ranboo actually scoffs, at his comment.

Oh, right. Wilbur was the one who had planted and detonated the TNT. Ranboo’s gotten used his presence, and made peace with it, but it absolutely doesn’t mean any forgiveness has been doled out.

Wilbur, for his part, can only shrug and offer condolences. After all, he never really cared of L’Manberg the way a president, or even citizen, should care for their country - though he is sorry, for many reasons, he doesn’t expect that to amount to anything. And that’s fine with him, really.

It’s not his home, and it never was.

This is pretty damn impressive, though.

“How *did* you do that anyway?” Tommy suddenly asks, glancing around to make sure no one is nearby enough to overhear. Wilbur does a quick check as well, and turns back to watch the city when he sees no one.

“Do what?” he asks, though more for confirmation of what he already suspects.

“Blow the foundation,” Tommy says. “To the point where the land itself was too damaged to rebuild on. You would have had to place the TNT deep into the ground for that, but the scale is just...”

He waves a hand around. "I didn't realize how massive it was until I saw this too."

"Oh." Wilbur grimaces. "I used the sewers."

L'Manberg had quite the sophisticated sewage system, actually. Too bad that's all gone now too.

"Wouldn't the TNT have gotten wet?"

"I used them as a starting point," Wilbur clarifies. "Then I dug smaller channels off to the side, and higher up, so they would remain dry, and used oil coatings to connect large batches. Took fucking forever, if you guys want to know how long I had deliberated about it."

He sighs. "After the Red Festival, I went back and just kept adding more TNT. The SMP certainly didn't mind supplying it."

Ranboo remains silent, even after Wilbur trails off. Tommy lets out a small "oh," but leans closer to Wilbur's side.

Perhaps what they choose to let go of aren't always the most defensible decisions.

They're here regardless now, however, and content with it. In the end, it's more than what Wilbur could have reasonably hoped for.

~\*~

The transportation that is Captain Puffy's job - getting Ranboo Underscore, First Lady of New L'Manberg and spouse of President Tubbo Underscore, to the White House - isn't all that climactic, in the end.

They eventually branch away from the lines of other larger ships, though not that large by oceanic traveling standards - *The Flock* is built for speed and light crews, after all, not to carry dozens of tons of merchandise.

When they split away, they're joined by 2 canoes, and are escorted into a smaller enclave of empty water marked out with floating green hoops, guard ropes connecting each one. Another canoe, though larger (and Techno suspects there will be new words for new designs like these soon) pulls close to the ship a few minutes later, 4 rowers and several guards, and Ranboo descends the rope ladder onto its deck. It then rows away, headed towards a massive white building in the distance - the White House, reconstructed, though with wood carved and painted in dedication instead of the limestone and marble it had once been before.

The building is gated with mangrove saplings and flagpoles, shining metal rods sunk deep into the lake bed below. Lily pads further barrier it from the rest of the city, though vessels cross those easily.

The area around the White House, Techno notes, also contains one of the few patches of solid land he's seen. Though the building overlooks a city in water, it crests itself upon a surrounding of grass-covered earth, like a tiny island risen above to the sky. One of the few places deemed important enough to reconstruct not only in its function, but also on the very ground it once stood upon.

There's even two small spruce trees planted near the small space of a front lawn. Guards, from this distance, appear to stand like tiny toy soldiers beside them.

Techno wonders how many tons of earth must have been poured and packed into the lake bed before they reached the water level and broken above. More probably, they did it before they deliberately

rerouted the Scription River with canals and flooded the city's ruins even higher. The techniques they used... he'll have to ask around, see if he can get a sense of the process.

As the canoe which carries Ranboo disappears around a bend, Techno turns to Captain Puffy beside him.

"I imagine canoe renting agencies have suddenly become a good business investment around here?" he asks.

Captain Puffy grins. "Why, of course. But there's no need to deal with that when the White House has already provided for us. And you."

Right. Because Tubbo has arranged for that as well.

"Don't worry. In a few years, I imagine walkways will become much more common. But for now, you and that strangely water-loving dog of yours will have to make do with the canoes." Captain Puffy lets out a sharp whistle, and behind her, the crew flurries into action.

"In a few years," Techno murmurs, taking in the waterway city L'Manberg has become. Wilbur's TNT had done the major foundational damage, and the withers had added to the toll while also polluting the water and soil. Withering agents released from wither attacks are only harmful when inhaled, and do not linger long in the air before settling like ash to the earth - or in this case, water - but in this case, the result the people have transformed it into is something to behold indeed.

He turns to go find the rest of his family among the bustling deck. They have a city to explore, apparently.

~\*~

"Glazed shrimp with - oh hello."

"Hi," Tommy says. The greeting comes out sounding more awkward than he expects. He clears his throat. "Um - I remember you used to sell crab cakes? Do you still - do that?"

This particular establishment had been a small restaurant Tommy occasionally visited (while in disguised civilian clothing) back during his brief time as L'Manberg's Vice President. He's surprised to see it rebuilt and appearing to do quite well, with even an outdoor dining area on the wood platform besides the building itself.

Like most other commercial or public buildings, it has small docks stretching out from a side, lines of wood walkways supported by tall posts, beside which canoes and other small vessels anchor ropes to.

"We sell crab cakes, yes," the waitress says. She's one of the owner's daughters, and looks barely 14. Probably not even - Tommy remembers having seen her running around the place before, years ago.

Right now, she looks vaguely bored. "70 bits each. 500 for 10."

"I'll get 10," Tommy says, while fishing the money from his satchel. Thank fuck banks around here do transfers for pure gold and other metals. "And do you have roasted seaweed?"

It's a question not to be taken literally. Almost all restaurants - especially those that don't specialize in something obscure - have seaweed as an available side. It's been a classic staple of the area's diet for as long as people have lived here. And, according to Captain Puffy before they had parted ways, it has only become more widespread in the wake of food shortages following the wars and November 16th.

“Yes,” the waitress at the counter replies. She looks almost as if she’s arching an eyebrow. “Roasted, fried, boiled - do you want a large or small side?”

“2 large sides,” Tommy says. “All of it wrapped and to go, please.”

“Sure. 10 minutes.”

He hands over the money - including the extra fee for the wrappings - and goes to sit at a table near the far wall. It’s a good thing they’re not busy this time of day; only one other person sulks on the opposite end of the waiting area, hunched over a book.

Around 10 minutes later, Tommy is leaving the doors with a large, steaming bundle wrapped in crinkly paper.

“Finally,” Wilbur grouses when Tommy’s thumping footsteps turns them all to his approach. Clementine takes a few sniffs, and arches her neck forth eagerly.

“It’s food.” Tommy rolls his eyes as he carefully steps over the brim and back into the canoe, Techno having taken the bundle from his arms. “They can’t magic it out of thin air.”

“It’s *good* food,” Phil says, mouth already full of crab cake. That’s an impressive speed. “I should figure out how they make these.”

Tommy shrugs, and grabs a smaller bundle from the nest of wrapping paper Techno has laid out on the deck. “It’s Wilbur’s turn to row.”

Wilbur groans, again. “I’m eating with one hand. Techno can man the other oar.”

“Fine by me,” Techno says.

Tommy allows himself a grin.

He had been a bit afraid, initially, when they’d first spotted land. L’Manberg holds many memories - some of which are good, many of which are bad, and all of which are tainted.

The waters seem to have washed away most of the surface-level association, however - though maybe they’ve already been washed, or at least, settled and supported with wood beams and platforms and able to be navigated with oars like new wind rising.

The place is fucking interesting, that’s for sure. Even if he’s not Techno or Wilbur, Tommy can admit he wants to see how it’s transformed so radically in the past 2 years.

The peace treaty signing ceremony starts this evening, and it’s still barely noon. They have plenty of time to see sights, old and new.

For better and for worse.

~\*~

“They’ve finished the embassies,” Wilbur says.

Of course, the region of Manberg - what the place had been called before he came along deciding to play revolutionary - had had foreign relations somewhat separate from the greater Dream SMP even

before all the independence erupted. But proper embassies and relations are for established nations, of which L'Manberg and the later re-renamed Manberg had not been considered.

Too unstable, everyone else thought. A disruptive part of the SMP who will pass back into the enfold of military arms soon enough.

Tubbo had been the one to change that idea.

And now, the gold and red-crossed flag of the Sparklez Kingdom breezes lightly on a pole, high before a building spread wide and dressed by black-splotched lily pads. The general area is fenced off with more of the floating green hoops and ropes, as well as the area beside it - which houses a building that waves flags with the familiar H-shaped crest of Hypixel.

Both embassies have outside patios with chairs and a table. Someone sits sipping tea on the Sparklez Kingdom's space. A few canoes line the docks.

"Governments congratulating each other," Techno says, scrunching up his nose. But there's no fire behind it - only a slight, mocking tease. A reference for old times.

Tommy snorts. "You can talk about the government all you want. Just don't hold up traffic."

"Right, right."

Wilbur learns from a direction sign several few minutes later that this particular "street" is called Embassy Lane.

~\*~

Tommy didn't think it's possible for a traffic jam to happen on the water with fucking boats, but here they are.

"The administration has regulations about how many canoes people can own, based on parking spaces," he says, sighing. "Tubbo told me that. So we won't be stuck here forever."

He's more than used to long stretches of time by now, time where they simply sit and think and talk and talk some more, idly, about things as pointless as circles or fractals or anything in between.

Tommy sees fractals behind his eyes, sometimes, after he dreams and before he awakes.

"We've been stuck here for 15 minutes," Wilbur grumbles, crunching up more roasted seaweed in his mouth. Clementine curls up beside him, chewing on a wrapper.

"*We've* been stuck here for almost an hour," someone from the canoe rowed up beside them says. Their vessel is facing the opposite direction, in the lane moving away from the city center.

"The nature of traffic jams is that they must be cleared eventually," Techno intones. "However long it takes. We can do little except wait."

Wilbur hums. "It's probably people trying to secure seats to watch the treaty signing."

They don't have to worry about that, of course, because the White House had turned this into an opportunity to sell tickets. The balconies of the buildings closest to the White House, from where the sight of Tubbo and Dream gathered on the tiny White House lawn shaking hands and making formal speeches will be seen and heard most clearly, are suddenly in reservation.

And Tubbo had included 4 tickets in his latest letter. Along with lodgings.

Most people, however, will have to watch from behind the ropes and green hoops, still in their canoes. Parking will be a nightmare.

“Don’t see why they’re all cheering so hard for it,” the person on the other canoe grumbles. “It’ll all come crashing down sooner or later.”

“You think New L’Manberg can’t trust the Dream SMP?” Tommy asks, the urge to defend Tubbo suddenly flaring. “There’s a difference between trusting them and knowing it’s in their best interests to play along.”

“I’m talkin’ about the so-called allies the President’s made, mostly,” the man says, shrugging. “There’s more Sparklez Kingdom troops guardin’ the borders than our own people. It’s gonna bite us one day, mark my words.”

His eyes arch in a look of almost disdain around the city. “These people cooped up all the way beside the ocean don’t get it. My family estate’s right near the border, though. Sparklez troops will be turning their swords on us next - they run an empire too, same as the SMP.”

L’Manberg lost the SMP’s protection against other countries when they declared independence. But that doesn’t mean they won’t rope it back again, in different ways. Tubbo is playing the long game - Tommy knows he has plans for that. Very classified plans, so he keeps his mouth shut and merely shrugs back.

They’re not very reliable or clear-cut plans. Those are impossible - a fever dream for deluded politicians. Not even the most well-thought of policies are guaranteed.

But it’s something Tubbo is aware of and making steps towards, even if he’s not as urgently fast-paced about it as certain other officials are urging him to be.

It’s not Tommy’s problem to worry about, even if he wishes he can be of help. He can’t get into pointless arguments - and he shouldn’t be turning his face towards strangers so much anyways.

So he remains quiet.

~\*~

The traffic jam clears, though they’re left with a spread of tightly packed canoes surrounding the White House, people there to claim spots for viewing. There are still several hours left, however, so they agree to row out to the outer boundaries of the city for a while and seek a more quiet reflection.

~\*~

Where water meets land and shores are being carved, habitation does not stop. After all, not the entirety of L’Manberg was leveled - the city is far too large, and far too old, for such.

Instead, while the inner districts now tangle with rippling soot-filled waters, the thinly spread outskirts support buildings upon land still.

From here, where they are at water’s edge, where willows shade a shallow glen and a few hardy fish live yet, Phil sees fields stretching in terraces up the hillsides. Harvested bare for the incoming winter.



It's only when Tommy bites a lip, stiffening, that Phil realizes he had been directed to stop here for a reason.

Slowly, Tommy turns towards a pile of cracked boulders. They're about large as several men side to side, and look as though something had previously jostled them into a landslide. It's a good few meters from the gravelly, water-swept shores, at the base of a hill otherwise covered in tilled land.

"That's the entrance to the Final Control Room," Tommy says. "We - I forgot we sealed it up after the war."

Wilbur takes a deep breath, sits down, and puts his face into his hands. Worried, Phil kneels down and gently nudges his shoulder.

"Wilbur?" Phil says.

Final Control Room. Tommy had said that's where he and L'Manberg's other original founders had been lured to by Eret, to be captured by SMP forces.

They had planned to escape and regroup the rebellion when L'Manberg was showered with explosives and marched into and overtaken. Instead, they had been attacked - Wilbur almost fatally wounded - and been forced to beg for their lives.

Phil's chest curls in anxiety when he thinks about it - how close Tommy and Wilbur had come to fading into death. How they *could* have just as easily died, with him and Techno none the wiser until news broke out far later, and far, far too late.

"Wilbur?" Techno echoes, staring down at Wilbur, who is now taking a long series of deep, rattling breaths like he's just choked on ash and dynamite smoke all over again. Clementine rumbles something in her throat, tilts her head. Her eyes blink around as though vaguely confused.

Tommy is still staring at the mound of boulders, distant and silent. Phil hesitates, and then brushes both of them with a wing.

Eventually, after however long, Wilbur's breathes slow out.

"I trust my family," he whispers quietly. "I trust you guys. That's enough, isn't it?"

Phil's wing curves around his shaking frame, an answer unto itself.

A noise, and a shuffle. Tommy kneels down and wiggles into the beneath of the wing as well, wrapping his arms around Wilbur in a tight embrace. He remains silent.

"We don't expect you to do 'enough' of anything," Techno says. Mutely, Phil and Tommy nod as well.

They sit there for a while, listening to birdsong and faint chatter from the few canoes that drift by. They're used to sitting, and thinking, and talking, and talking some more, and then falling silent again. It's become a comfortable feeling, in many ways.

"It happened." Tommy finally says, and finally lifts his head. "This place'll be forgotten until some random diver or construction crew discovers it 300 years later and wonders what the fuck it is. Nice little urban mystery. But there's nothing of worth left for us here."

"No, there isn't," Wilbur says. He presses closer against Phil's side, a burning warmth. "Let's go."

Techno begins rowing them back towards the city proper.

~\*~

“Oh,” Tommy says. “The L’Mantree survived.”

It still rises proudly, and from solid earth, like another tiny island surrounded by lily pads and kelp fields. Its leaves are black and gold and green; several ash-mottled doves nest on a branch. No buildings stalk within a dozen yards of it. And though there are no ropes bearing restriction, no ships part the lilypads either.

“That’s nice, I guess,” Wilbur says vaguely. He blinks at the tree, long and slow.

Techno rows on. Soon, the L’Mantree disappears from sight.

~\*~

New L’Manberg’s trade has steadily increased towards pre-November 16th levels in the past year and a half, and by now travelers are regularly visiting the city once more.

There’s a new revenue source. When a city is literally rebuilt above a lake, and the main method of transportation has become canoes, it becomes an inevitable curiosity.

Which means tourism.

Which means they have little trouble finding a nice hotel to stay at, even appearing as shady as they are. Or, more specifically, *Tubbo* had little trouble finding them one.

The place is almost directly southeast of the White House, and the balcony of the room that’s already been reserved for them has one of the clearest views of the White House lawn possible. It is, in fact, the location for the tickets of space Tubbo had procured for them, lodgings and all.

Techno, Wilbur, and Tommy go up to their room almost immediately, none of them eager to stay around the lobby full of people for long.

There’s still about an hour left until the moon first rises and the signing will commence, however, and as Phil *isn’t* a wanted criminal around here, he orders himself a drink and settles into one of the plush chairs around the lobby.

Clementine, by virtue of also not being a wanted criminal, decides to stay with him with curious eyes that haven’t stopped darting around to take in the new sights and sounds all day. She eventually curls up at Phil’s feet, nose buried deep into the carpet and sniffing around.

Someone joins him after a while, with their own glass and a book. Which - fuck. He’s forgotten waiting is a bit of a social activity around here. Waiting in line? Waiting for food? Lounging around looking like he’s waiting for anything? To New L’Manbergians, it’s apparently always an invitation to invade personal space.

Phil side-eyes the new person, and nearly chokes on his drink when he sees the title of their book - *A Comprehensive History and Treatise of Potato Farming*.

Fucking gods.

“It’s quite the good book,” the woman who’s seated herself beside him defends, apparently noticing the object of his attention. “New bestseller around here.”

She pauses, and snorts. “The section about how to maximize growth in withered soil might have something to do with it.”

Oh, right. Techno had included a section about that, hadn’t he - done many of his own tests and all. The book has new information and techniques Techno developed himself.

And of course, L’Manberg’s residents would hound all over that information. That right there is what Techno would call dramatic irony.

Clementine tilts her head at the book curiously, as though trying to decipher something. Typical.

Phil downs the last of his drink, leaves the glass at the table, and pushes himself up.

“I’m going to go now,” he says. “Well - bye.”

Clementine sniffs at the book, while the woman frowns at her with a crossed expression on her face.

“Come on, girl,” Phil calls, already halfway to the stairs.

With the dog equivalent of a shrug, she turns and bounds over to his side once more.

~\*~

When Dream walks down the White House steps beside Tubbo, Techno has to wrap an arm around Tommy tight to make sure he doesn’t accidentally fall off the railing.

“The green bastard,” Tommy grumbles.

But he can’t bring any heat to it - not even hatred, really. Dream, in the end, had done what most other leaders of a country would have done if a sub-portion had declared independence - declared war back and fought to keep the nation together.

He hates Dream. He despises Dream. Dream caused so many of their problems, encouraged so much of their downward spiral.

There were many things Dream did that he didn’t have to do, even factoring in political pressure as leader of a country. Many of those things made no fucking sense.

Dream makes no fucking sense, really, no matter which way Tommy tries to spin it.

But. His anger for Dream lies like his anger for Techno or Wilbur - flat, and awashed, and out of spark, though without any foundation of love and fondness to glide beneath it.

There’s only so long, and for so many reasons, that one can keep such an intensely burning emotion aflame.

He can’t even grasp a reason to keep the anger as some others might, explosive and dormant, ready to flare at provocation. Acknowledging everything horrible Dream has done, especially to Wilbur, is all well and good - and he can be deeply upset about it all, but-

But Tommy doesn't want to spend more of his life re-dwelling on what has happened. He knows Wilbur doesn't either. They have thought until there is nothing new left for them to think - nothing new that could incite incident, anyway. There is, after all, so much more for the future than the past.

~\*~

The signing takes place on a circular table, from where Tubbo and Dream seat on either side of each other. Wind ruffles across the now tiny White House lawn, a rare patch of clear ground among the lake.

It's oddly anti-climatic, in a way. Quiet. Peaceful. As though the two are simply out for tea together.

Tubbo has 5 guards fanned out behind him. Additionally, Ranboo is to one side, standing, and Niki to the other. It's too far to clearly make out her expression, but her stance is formal.

Dream has his own personal guard, 5 fanned out behind him as well, though he probably needs it far less than Tubbo. After all, he is not the one with impaired vision and movement.

Wilbur brushes a stray of hair back behind his ear. This signing will mark New L'Manberg as fully, undeniably, a new and independent nation, to be recorded and considered as such. After all, the largest threat to its existence will tonight not only acknowledge its station, but also that it itself is in a position where to attack is disadvantageous.

This treaty, defining borders and receding militaries and easing hostilities and opening trade, is the axiom upon which New L'Manberg will now define its stability among the international world.

For all of Wilbur's efforts, all his furious schemes and crazed insistencies - once he left, the nation grew stronger than it ever was beneath him.

Unfinished symphony, indeed.

Niki Nihachu is who reads the terms of the treaty, to every person on the balconies and the waters and leaning over railings and shoving their heads through windows, crammed with friends and family and complete strangers. To the hillsides and newly harvested fields and the plains and forests and estates beyond.

The treaty is long, and so the reading is long. It is to listen with bated breath, quiet stares. The entire city is holding vigil for the nation New L'Manberg was before, and the nation New L'Manberg will be after.

Wilbur listens as well. He hears conflict and resolution, hardlines and compromises, arguments and thinly veiled implications and long hours at the negotiation tables for months. He hears gained grounds and cut losses - he hears history turning its gears like a half-oiled machine.

He hears a nation who will continue to rise. A nation that is no longer his - that was never his in the first place.

When Niki finishes reading, she sets the document on the table between Tubbo and Dream, and smooths it out.

Tubbo takes the quill first. Dips it in ink. Signs his name in bold flourishes, clearly practiced. Then, he turns the document around, and tips the quill in Dream's direction.

Dream's mask has not changed. It gives nothing but a smile, and not even that. Wilbur once wondered if a being such as Dream even has anything to give.

He does tonight. With another dip into ink, he signs the treaty with a curve of lines. The quill is then returned to the space beside the document, halfway between them.

Ranboo and Niki begin to clap. And then, Tubbo and Dream's guards.

*And then*, almost all at once, the city of L'Manberg erupts into elated cheering.

Wilbur dips his head, once, and clasps his hands together.

Though this symphony isn't his, it plays on regardless. And it claims his heart no longer.

## Chapter End Notes

Scriptio River, derived from the word subscription, which (in the vos universe, not irl) used to mean “of which we are subservient to,” as mythology says an important and powerful god lays dormant in the river and it is what blesses the people with the winds and tides essential to their seafaring life. obviously the real reason is because y'all should hit subscribe to this fic and my ao3 account its free and you can always unsubscribe later but yes i like making up language and naming etymology

when i considered how much of tommy and dream's personal antagonistic relationship developed after November 16th, its... a lot. before it, dream fought against lmanberg as a whole and on a national level, not really anything specific to tommy besides the duel and discs thing, and really wilbur had more of a developed relationship with the whole pogtopia downward spiral thing he encouraged

so yeah there's actually not as much trauma as you'd expect regarding dream??? between him and tommy. its surprising in hindsight how much the exile arc kicked off between them. like yeah, shooting him in the duel was bad bc Murder, but tommy was the one who suggested it and they had rules set in place about it beforehand. And the discs were like,,,

i mean like yes, they were important, buuuuut... “discs aren't people, tommy”. they're discs. i... find it kind of a stretch to believe dream taunting tommy with the fact that he has the discs could cause trauma near the level of what he did the wilbur in pogtopia (encouraging his distrust, supplying tnt, utterly wrecking his hopes of getting his mental health together). pre-nov 16, the discs were a device used to get tommy to do what he wanted, to negotiate with, but it was season 2 where the disc manipulation started to get to really, really fucked up levels. because its not inherently the fact that the discs are discs, but what dream does with them and what it causes - dream taunts tommy with the fact that he has the discs? meh. dream blowing l'manberg sky high to leave everyone as homeless as he was after tommy surrendered the last disc to him? dream making the discs the centerpiece to his room of attachments that includes plans to shove a human person into a tiny standing cell? now that's fucking... fucked.

i mean its all very fucked to hold something like that over a teenager but you know this is dsmp canon we gotta differentiate between levels and i gotta prioritize which elements are the most concerning to address and which ones i should write off as not-really-consequential joke bit (like for example the railway skirmish. definitely not canon in this universe lmao). otherwise this fic

would be 10 million words and delving into the deep complexities of tommy's fear of clownfish and how that overlaps with his 8 different character arcs

keep in mind im referring to the level of trauma related to dream specifically tommy has, not to war itself, which are two very different sources

also yeah, when i said this fic ignores everything post nov-16, i mean everything, and that includes everything regarding dream's characterization. i built vos!dream's character off of s1 dream only (and when i say s1 i mean everything from nov 16 and before), and back then he hadn't gained his reputation as professional child manipulator yet, so keep that in mind as we continue.

yes i did take liberties with the final control room location. The entrance would have been somewhere in lmanberg but there had to have been an exit too given motivation, since it was used as an escape tunnel to get out of the city once the smp started marching in. i decided to leave it as a room for the 5 founders to escape to with eret using the excuse he had prepared it so they could hide or run so the dsmp couldnt capture them. obviously it was all a lie because BetrayalTM but yeah that. so its carved into a hill on the outskirts of lmanberg the city, where there were already tunnels made by the people who've lived there for centuries or something.

also had to think quite a bit about other stuff for this one. like the city of lmanberg. i actually based the "building city on a lake" thing off venice, which is build on a lagoon and has canals for streets instead of roads. while the boats are called canoes here because they mimic canoes in design, soon they'll develop into a more gondola-like style and be specially designed to navigate the waters around the city

(continued in the comments, again, ao3 pls expand character limit for note boxes)

# we'll need your testimony on the stand

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

A... canoe-like boat thing, but too large and keeled, is there to escort them to the White House. It's exactly the time they had agreed to. Two guards row it to the hotel's docks, dressed in light blue uniforms.

The first to board is Clementine, leaping into the boat from such a high angle it nearly topples over with both guards still on. They exchange mildly ruffled glances, water dripping over the newly sanded sides of the vessel.

Tommy steps on afterwards, followed by Wilbur, and then Phil, and Techno - who mutters an apology.

Wilbur's hood is up. Tommy doesn't bother.

They glide through the lilypad field which encircles the White House, the plants which dip and sway with the ripples, and they continue, past an opening in the ropes.

The docks of the White House, connected to land, are painted a combination of red, white, blue, and black. They thunk hard, steady, when Tommy plants a boot on them and hauls himself off the not-canoe (because that boat thing does not look like a fucking canoe, and New L'Manberg better get some new vocabulary into its dialect soon).

They're accompanied by the two silent guards past the doors, through the hallways that look quite different from what Tommy remembers, which makes sense considering they aren't, of course, the same hallways - and finally, they reach a large room with couches and a table. A tea room, or something.

"The First Lady will attend to you shortly," one of the soldiers says, before clicking the door shut gently.

Tommy flops onto a couch. The rest of his family quickly do the same, with varying levels of dignifiedness. Clementine begins gnawing on the table.

"...great room service," Phil eventually says.

Tommy snorts. "It's the fucking White House. They probably think we're suspicious as fuck."

"Which we are," Techno says. "Tubbo isn't the sole authority around here, but he's acting like he is by allowing us in. And not telling anyone else our identities or purpose."

Wilbur shrugs. "Ranboo can help support Tubbo, once these new guards gain some more trust in him-"

"What kind of trust?"

They all turn as Ranboo pokes his head through the doorway. He blinks once, and then twice, at Clementine, before stepping in and shutting the door behind him.

“You’ve got an absence to make up for,” Tommy shrugs. Clementine stops, mid-table chewing, to bark an affirmative.

Ranboo winces. “Yep. That I do. It’s going a bit better than I expected, honestly - I’ve only overheard one person mutter about me being a hybrid!”

“Ender hybrids are more common around New L’Manberg, aren’t they?” Phil asks. Ranboo nods.

“More of them gripe about me being a foreigner, actually. But Tubbo’s power is a lot more stable now, so they don’t want to say it to either of our faces anymore.” Ranboo makes a face. “I actually like New L’Manberg more than Hypixel. The scenery’s less stressful.”

“And the White House feels less intimidating,” Tommy says, nodding his head thoughtfully. “Makes sense. Tubbo said he asked the architects to design it this way.”

“It’s my job to decorate the place now too,” Ranboo says. He brightens a bit. “One of the few things I actually like about my position.”

He glances around. “Anyway, this room clearly hasn’t been decorated... at all. So, uh - how about I show you guys around a bit? Tubbo should be out of his meeting in like an hour. Maybe a less.”

“Sure,” Tommy says. He bounces back up, skips over to the door in a few short seconds, and swings it open.

A painting of a lemon tree greets him, of all things, though the sturdily stiff trunk does tickle some vaguely familiar memory. As Tommy’s used to such a feeling, he simply spins around with his arms flung wide and grins at his family, still in the room.

“Sure,” Techno echoes, rising. With a blink between them, Phil does as well, and Wilbur. Clementine still has her eyes closed, expression blissful as she slowly works her way through the table leg. Tommy wonders what kind of drugs the trees around here now absorb.

“Let’s hope no one recognizes me,” Wilbur sighs. “It’s a lot easier to cry foul in the White House than on some random streets. Lake.”

“Nah,” Tommy shrugs. “Your hair’s longer now. That’s clearly the best disguise possible.”

~\*~

Wilbur keeps his hood up. He’d rather endure the occasional weird stare than risk anything. He’s not even the only person who has walked these halls with an adverse reaction to people seeing their faces unshadowed, so it’s fine!

The peace lasts 10 sweet minutes; 10 minute of Ranboo chatting about the architecture while Tommy listens, Phil’s eyes roam, and only Techno appears genuinely captivated.

They’re on the second floor. The White House has balconies over looking the city - multiple, some large enough for tea parties and some with barely enough room to stand on.

Wilbur looks, and he sees a person on a balcony.

Her hair is long, flowing, loose. Dark brown, recently brushed. There are thin doors between them, with stained white windows. Enough of a sound barrier.



Niki reaches up and brushes a strand of hair back behind an ear.

She's - she's *right there*.

"I'm - I'm going to step out for a moment," Wilbur says. He realizes he's interrupted Ranboo only after they're all staring at him, and then at Niki, still leaning obliviously over the balcony railings while gazing upon the city below. Clementine thumps her tail quietly as she sits down.

"Wilbur," Tommy says.

"I should... at least talk to her, shouldn't I?"

Tommy is quiet for a long moment. And then, finally, he says; "yeah. You should. But you don't have to."

"I want to," Wilbur says, a little stronger. His attempts to still his heartbeat feel somewhat successful.

He draws in another breath, forcing slowness, forcing evenness. *One, two, three and-four and-one and-two...*

"Cool," Tommy says, quietly.

"Do you want me to stand by and make sure you don't die?" Techno asks.

Wilbur fingers the totem necklace still around his throat. The tiny figurine pressed tight against his bare chest, cold. Promising.

He has a dagger hidden in his boot, and the cane he wields has a solid weight to it - usable as a weapon, even without being unscrewed into a blade.

"I think you guys should go one for now," Wilbur says. "I - explaining you and Phil would be..."

Difficult, to say the least. Techno is still the most detested person in New L'Manberg right now, and largely blamed for November 16th - even more than Wilbur, though Wilbur arguably did more damage.

It's easier to turn vengeance on someone never known.

"It would make things complicated, yeah," Tommy agrees. "I don't think letting anyone near who might recognize Techno is a good idea."

Quite frankly, Techno should have stayed at the hotel if they had been playing this safe, but no one really recognizes Techno in his unmasked form anyways, so completely stripped of context.

That is, assuming he doesn't speak or fight.

Ranboo glances between them for a moment. "What if..."

Wilbur makes up his mind. "It's fine. This place is the most guarded in the whole city, and no one's hardly going to commit casual murder in the halls - you guys can go tour and find Tubbo. I'll catch up later."

He hadn't been paying much attention to the tour anyway. There's nothing for him here, besides the words left to give.

“We’ll wait for you in the courtyard,” Ranboo says, nodding. “Tubbo said he’ll go there after the meeting’s done. It won’t be long.”

Tommy frowns, and then glances down. “Clementine?”

Clementine woofs, and trots over to Wilbur’s side. A tail thwacks against his leg.

“She’s staying with you,” Tommy says.

Wilbur smiles, and manages a shaky kneel to scratch her head. “Right. Thanks, girl. And thanks, Tommy.”

Tommy flashes a thumbs up. Then he nods to Ranboo, who resumes leading them down the hallway.

Techno and Phil both shoot a last glance at him. Wilbur pets Clementine one last time, waves slightly, and wait until they round into a corner and out of sight.

With a deep breath, he rises. Clicks over to the doors of the balcony with his cane, his gait slightly wobblier than usual.

Then, he presses down on the handle.

~\*~

“Who are you?”

Straight to the chase. Niki’s eyes are turned to his, and away from the city it was beholding.

Wilbur realizes, too late, he probably should have pulled down his hood first. He rectifies this - better late than never, and all.

Niki’s head tilts as the fabric falls away. Her eyes narrow ever so slightly. “Do I know you?”

Ah. 2 years really do change quite a bit. More for Wilbur than most others - these 2 years specifically.

He didn’t recognize himself back during Pogtopia either.

“Niki,” Wilbur says, because that’s about all he can say. On this pinnacle he’s climbed onto, anyways. He tries the name again. “Niki Nihachu.”

The balcony construction is sturdy. Enough to hold at least a dozen people, probably, though there isn’t enough room for a dozen bodies. There’s only enough room for him, Niki, a chair, and dog clambering up to curl on the chair. Probably one more person as well.

Niki blinks, slowly. “You’re very familiar. But I’m won’t say who you remind me of, because that would be a rather rude comparison.”

Wilbur throws a small laugh at that, which startles Clementine enough that she barks a similar sound as well. He can feel Niki peering through his shoulder, curious.

“I’m Wilbur Soot,” he says, the piece clicking into place with just the slightest of nudges.

Niki blinks, again, even slower. She brings a hand to her cheek, presses a smoothly filed curved of a nail into flesh. Her suit - formal attire, *Parliament attire* - bends with her with surprising flexibility. Wilbur wonders faintly what the cloth blend is.

“Oh,” she says finally. “Did Tubbo finally do that necromancy thing? Is-”

Her eyes widen. “Is the dog Tommy? Did he actually die too? I didn’t think-”

“The dog is not Tommy,” Wilbur says, because that seems about the most important piece of information he can convey right now. Followed by; “also, I’m not a ghost.”

Niki blinks. “Necromancy can force dead souls into new bodies. No wonder you look - you’re so *off*, but so similar. How did Tubbo-”

“Tubbo also didn’t do necromancy,” Wilbur clarifies further. He pauses, and then winces. “Though, I guess I did come back from the dead. A few times.”

“A few-” Niki’s eyebrow scrunches. And then, suddenly, she’s crossing the distance between them-

A furious snarl explodes from Clementine as Wilbur narrowly dodges being punched in the face. His bad leg gives out beneath him - collapsing onto the white flooring, he wheezes as a large, furry shape steps over him with hackles raised and throat growling like approaching thunder.

Niki gasps, above him. For what? It has to be a delayed reaction.

“Uh - I’d rather not come back to life a 4th time,” Wilbur chokes out through the saliva strung in his windpipe. “Punches to the head can fracture bone and cause brain damage-”

Clementine snarls ever louder, the sound rumbling through Wilbur’s body as well as her’s.

Niki’s breath hitches. Then, quiet and furious; “what are you doing here?”

With some effort, Wilbur catches a hand on the railing and hobbles himself onto his feet. Clementine nudges his cane back beneath his hand, and then pushes him to the chair. Wilbur slumps into it without protest, back muscles crying with relief at the cool support.

“Nothing terrorism related, if that’s your worry,” he says. He hides a postword wince - of course that’s what she’s worried about.

“Then why?” Niki demands. She holds herself higher now, almost more threatening, and circles Clementine’s hostile gaze warily.

Wilbur runs through the potential answers in his head. “Tommy wanted to see Tubbo again.”

Niki stiffens. “So Tommy’s alive?”

“Uh - yes.”

Relief flashes across her face, briefly, before it settles back into its previous expression; stonily neutral.

“I’m here because I’m not in the business of leaving Tommy here alone,” Wilbur adds. He debates the merits of telling her about Techno or Phil, but quickly rules it out. He and Niki were close friends once - she wouldn’t do anything drastic without hearing him out first, at least. But chances are, she’ll sound the alarms about Techno as soon as she realizes who else Tommy accompanies with him.

It’s a good thing no one knows of their secret familial connection.

And of course, Phil was never involved in the whole L'Manberg debacle. Small mercies.

"And where is Tommy right now?" Niki asks.

"With Ranboo, waiting for Tubbo," Wilbur says.

"First Lady Ranboo."

"Right," Wilbur says, and tries to keep a straight face. "First Lady Ranboo."

Niki frowns, but doesn't comment further on the matter. Instead, she turns towards the balcony edge again.

"They're lowering the flags," she says stiffly.

Wilbur looks out. Indeed, the White House is ringed with flags, and now beside each pole is a guard slowly guiding the waves of color down.

"That's a slightly altered design," Wilbur notes. The Xs have been replaced with 3 triangle peaks from the left side.

"Well, we certainly weren't going to stay with your original one," she says. An eye swivels to him.

Wilbur shrugs faintly. Niki purses her lips, clearly tense.

They watch in silence until all the flags are fully lowered. At some point. Clementine carefully climbs into Wilbur's lap, and he finds himself stroking down her head and spine again.

The stars in New L'Manberg are completely different from those in Pyserne. Same brightness, different constellations.

The moon is the same, however. It glows bright as a disc tonight.

"Who revived you?" Niki suddenly asks. Her voice is tight. "Was it Tommy?"

"What? Of course not." Wilbur pauses. He hadn't meant for the revival comment to be taken so seriously, but he supposes few things about his sudden reappearance would make sense otherwise. "I guess if you want to get technical, no one did. They were all from totems of undying. But-"

He frowns. "I guess the real answer would be my father. I most definitely wouldn't be alive right now, if it weren't for him."

"And what does your father want of you?" Niki asks, twisting to stare him directly face to face. Wilbur doesn't budge, though he does wish the look in her eyes is a little less... intense.

"To... not be dead? To be happy?" Wilbur's face scrunches up. "What fathers usually want for their children, I guess. He did go through the trouble getting me the totems. And sometimes sneaking them on me without me noticing."

He winces at the memory. Not a fun one, by any stretch.

"Is that how you survived the explosions?"

"Uh - he stopped me from killing myself the normal way that time. So the answer is no."

Wilbur should really think about what he's saying a little more, he realizes as Niki's expression twists into something undefinable. Something angry, resentful - disturbed.

"I'm mostly okay now," Wilbur says. Fuck, he's not - it's been long time since he's had to worry about twisting his words to fit a mold. He's so rusty. "You probably don't care that much, but - well. Just know that I'll be out of New L'Manberg within a week or 2 again, and I don't plan on committing more crimes."

Niki takes a deep, rattling breath, and clutches the railing. "Great. Wonderful. Fantastic. Wilbur-fucking-Soot is talking to me again. After he and his brother disappeared off to Prime-knows-where for 2 years and we all thought you were *dead* -"

"-a fairly logical assumption to make, really," Wilbur says.

"You're not helping."

"Sorry?"

Niki laughs again, weakly. "Oh, so you're sorry for *that*, huh? Are you sorry about that time you destroyed all your relationships? That time you destroyed a whole city? That time you destroyed our - our fucking lives?"

"I'm sorry about what I've done to a lot of people," Wilbur says, refusing to look away. "And I wouldn't have made many of those decisions now."

He hesitates. "Which, I suppose, means I *am* sorry for pressing that button. And blowing up L'Manberg."

The words feel strange to say. They feel even stranger being said to Niki.

"*Sorry*' doesn't fix anything," Niki says lowly.

"I know," Wilbur says simply. A hand brushes over Clementine's head again. She shifts a bit - and fuck, now his legs have fallen asleep.

He blinks when Clementine sniffs the air, leaps off his lap, and pushes her way through the doors of the balcony.

"Clementine?" Wilbur asks, grabbing his cane and preparing to haul himself up again. "What are you doing?"

A distant bark. And then - "holy fuck, who let a dog into the White House?"

Niki and Wilbur stiffen simultaneously. Wilbur tightens his grip on his cane, though he doesn't move to stand up.

Clementine trots through the doors again, looking enormously pleased with herself as she settles into a position at Wilbur's feet.

And following her, ears perked and steps cautious, is Fundy.

~\*~

"The natural progression of change is resistance."

“And who’s that quote by?” Tommy asks.

Techno blinks. “Me.”

~\*~

“...holy fuckity fucking fuck,” Fundy says, blinking. “Tubbo actually went through with it.”

Is - is that a common assumption around here? That Tubbo’s planning to resurrect Wilbur? It makes little sense, the least of which because there’s no way Tubbo would be able to learn the skills necessary for that in only 2 years but-

“Wait. Does that mean you’re bound to his command or something?” Fundy takes a step forward, eyes searching Wilbur up and down. “What does he want you to do? Your drafts on efficient freshwater distribution were pretty solid, but I can’t find the final page on how to divide districts-”

“The library, second storage isle, section 6,” Wilbur says. “But, uh - Tubbo didn’t revive me.”

“No,” Niki says, still glowering. “Get this, Fundy - his *father* did.”

Fundy remains silent for a long moment. And then; “you have a *father*?”

“...yes?” Wilbur frowns at the incredulous tone of voice. “He didn’t really resurrect me though - not sure where all of you got that idea. All the lingering death magic on me comes from totems of undying.”

Fundy blinks once, twice. A hand twitches.

Clementine growls again.

“If you try to punch me, she *will* bite you,” Wilbur says. “There’s not much I can do about that. Not that I *want* you to punch me, mind you - I quite like not being in horrible pain.”

Fundy’s face morphs into a scowl. “What are you *doing* here?”

Wilbur blinks. “I’m not planning on doing crime, I’ll be gone in a week or 2, I’m here with Tommy because he wants to see Tubbo again, yes Tubbo knows we’re here, it would be a bad idea to leak any locations because my dad who *can* do necromancy will hunt you down and stab you very painfully and actually revive me anyway and swamp me with so many totems it’ll rival New L’Manberg’s entire GDP-”

“Is that where the white hairs come from?” Fundy suddenly asks.

Wilbur pauses. “What?”

“You have white hairs. Just a few strands, but-” Fundy waves a hand over his head. “Spread out-ish. I thought I saw a few.”

Huh. He’ll have to look in a mirror some time. It’s not like he pays all that much attention to his physical appearance nowadays.

“Side effect of coming back from the dead so many times, maybe?” Wilbur shrugs. “Anyway - uh - questions? Comments? I’ll be out soon.”

Fundy suddenly looks 3 seconds away from exploding.

“*Questions?* We thought you died after blowing up this *entire fucking city!* You think we-” he breaks off, groans, and stumbles back to slump against the wall. “What the actual *fuck?*”

Wilbur takes a deep breath. Might as well get the words out of the way first. “I’m - I’m sorry I was so awful to you when we were in Pogtopia.”

Fundy freezes.

“Oh,” he says, voice tight. “So that’s what you choose to talk about.”

Wilbur frowns. “You know I’ve always held my personal relationships closer than national ones. I - I’m sorry for what November 16th did to you, too, and to Niki and Tubbo and a lot of other people. But I’m - I figured if I had to apologize for anything to you, given this chance right here, it would be how our relationship-”

“Got completely fucking obliterated,” Fundy says. “Yeah, I got that.”

He adjusts the collar of his shirt - less formal than Niki’s, patterned blue and white. A simple long-sleeved sweater.

“So,” Wilbur says. He forces his feet not to shuffle - the one that can, anyways. “I am. Sorry about everything I said to you. I was - I thought everyone was out to betray me back then, and I overreacted far too much to you burning the flag. And just - to being exiled in general. And I’m sorry for - uh - flat out disowning you. A couple times.”

“We both did that,” Fundy shrugs. “Not like you ever gave much attention to whether I was actually your son or not. Not like-”

He expression twists. “Not like *your* father, apparently.”

“If we could have ever been considered family at one point-” Wilbur sighs, and strokes Clementine’s head again. Her fur is smooth, warm; grounding. “I don’t think we can be anymore.”

Fundy scowls. “We haven’t been family in a long time, Wilbur Soot. Since at least November 16th.”

Wilbur nods. “I’m not here to ask for that again. I just - I figured you deserved some kind of explanation about where me and Tommy had gone. It’s not like you can do much with the information.”

“We can turn you in,” Niki grumbles.

“Tubbo knows,” Wilbur reminds them. “You’re politically aligned with him right now. It’s hard to risk these things. Besides-”

He glances over the balcony railings. L’Manberg is a hundred constellations on the black lake, like a different night sky all unto itself, an incorrect reflection of the stars above. “Besides, Tommy would sooner throw himself at the police or guards than let them take me. Not that I would let it get to that point.”

Their hidden aces are Techno and Phil, of course - distance like this is little to a man with wings and speed potions.

Fundy and Niki share uneasy glances. It's easy to weight the costs and benefits - reporting Wilbur would result in, at best, the public execution of a man who's been gone for 2 years, and who has no plans of returning in the future. But they do not live in best case scenario worlds.

"Well then," Fundy says, voice tight. "When are you leaving?"

"When Tommy and Tubbo decide they're done," Wilbur shrugs. "Which could take a while."

"I, for one, would like to know what Tubbo was thinking," Niki says shortly. A brief smile dangles from her lips. "Let's pay him a visit, shall we?"

Wilbur can see how she has managed to thrive in this political environment. Fundy merely shoots Wilbur another cold glance, and then nods.

"We should get going, then," he says. He doesn't approach Wilbur again, not that Clementine would allow him. Wilbur drives his cane into the ground and pushes himself up.

"Fine by me," he shrugs, again. "Lead the way."

~\*~

Tubbo isn't in the courtyard when they arrive, still caught up in his meeting, but Tommy, Ranboo, and Phil are.

To his immense relief, Techno isn't. Probably too caught up staring at the painting collection this place has.

"Uh-" Ranboo looks distinctly trapped, glancing between Niki and Fundy with equal measures of being caught off-guard. "Hi?"

Tommy silently stalks forward, and lightly tugs Wilbur back until he's safely at his side, instead of begin jostled between his previous two companion.

"Tommy?" Niki takes a jerky step forward, and then pauses at the warning look Tommy shoots at her.

"You didn't hurt Wilbur, did you?"

"They didn't," Wilbur quickly says. Clementine lets out a soft growl as she trots around them, though looking pleased with her own performance.

Tommy nods, and his expression abruptly relaxes. "Then, uh - hello, Niki. Fundy."

They all stare. For several seconds.

"I thought you were dead," Fundy finally says.

"I didn't," Niki counteracts quickly. She frowns. "You *did* disappear, though."

"I care about some things a lot more than L'Manberg," Tommy says, shrugging. "My family, for example."

There's an awkward pause as everyone takes in the implications of the statement - including who that leaves out.



“So very good to know,” Fundy snorts. “Well - thanks for nothing from both you and Wilbur, I guess. But I have paperwork to sort out now.”

Before he can turn and stalk out the courtyard, however, Niki’s voice stalls him.

“Who’s that?” She’s staring directly into Phil.

Wilbur internally curses. Having to explain Phil makes this significantly more... complicated.

Not that he should be afraid of complications like this. But still.

“I’m Wilbur and Tommy’s father,” Phil says easily.

Fundy stills.

“I see,” he says, voice even. “Glad to have met you.”

And then, in a few long, fast strides, he turns. Crosses back through the courtyard. Soon he disappears beyond the set of doors, and into the White House’s hallways.

It hurts less for him this way, Wilbur guesses. After all, Phil will never be family to Fundy.

Fundy was never Wilbur’s son the way Wilbur was Phil’s. He should never have tried, should never have given that false hope in the first place. Not when neither of them were ever ready for it.

That is a regret. It is done now. Fundy has rebuilt his life from the pieces of what he was left with, and so has Wilbur, and their respective puzzles are now left incompatible by distance and disillusion.

But. They’ve said their words. They’ve acknowledged their differences. They’ve reached an understanding.

Phil will probably never be in the equation, and it seems they’re both content to let it lie this way.

“Wilbur’s father?” Niki’s gaze sharpens. Clementine bristles again, and so does Tommy.

“Yes,” Phil says, expression hidden behind what is more of a mask than Dream’s ever will be.

Niki looks as though she’s about to launch into something - a rant, perhaps, and something fierce like in the way she had attacked Wilbur with her questions and confirmations.

But then she pulls back, takes a deep breath, and squares her shoulders.

“I’ll talk to Tubbo in private later,” she says. “And Wilbur, you better be gone from this country by the end of the month.”

“That’s the plan,” Phil says carefully.

Niki nods. “Great. I don’t need to know any more than that. And it is quite frankly not worth my time to care.”

She turns around, and pauses on the first step. “Goodbye, Wilbur. And goodbye, Tommy - I hope you’ve found this all worth it.”

“Wilbur is worth more to me than L’Manberg ever was,” Tommy says quietly.

Niki nods. And with that, she follows Fundy's path back into the White House interior.

They're left with little but the occasional chirping of birds for a while, and a slight humming buzz, until Ranboo clears his throat. "So... who wants to look at Tubbo's bees while we wait for him?"

~\*~

He's not lost. Certainly not in the White House. He has an excellent sense of direction - the best in the world, in fact. This truth is irrefutable.

Well.

Hm.

Alright, maybe Techno is a *tiny* bit lost.

But the White House is only so large. Once he finds the courtyard, he'll be set.

"...I don't care. I can't afford to. So we'll just leave things as is-"

Techno ducks behind another corner, narrowly avoiding the sight of 2 people stalking down the hallway.

It's Fundy. And Nihachu.

Something rests on his tongue. Something weighted, impossibly tight like a star collapsing - something he should say.

Apologies and explanations and internalizing...

But not today. Most likely, not ever. He's content with that. There need not be resolutions to all his regrets, and he has never been one to chase an ideal otherwise.

Techno waits until they pass out of sight, and continues his semi-planned expedition of the White House. There shouldn't be many other government officials around, considering how Parliament isn't currently in session. Any who pass by will assume he's a guest, which he technically is. Worst case scenario, he can even prove he's Whitelisted, as a legitimate excuse.

So, as long as he keeps his ears open, he can continue studying the artwork in peace.

While also navigating his way towards courtyard to find the rest of his family, of course - with a completely defined sense of direction.

~\*~

Tubbo's bees are really, really cute. They don't have a propensity for stinging people either, despite the presence of stingers.

They nest in a small white-glass dome at the far end of the courtyard, where wood boxes support the slabs of hive. Openings in the dome allow them in and out, which can be closed at night to prevent the bees from leaving if need be.

Right now, however, the small colony has full range of the courtyard.

"They're really tame," Tommy comments, watching one lift off from his finger.

“Yeah,” Ranboo says. They’re both curled beneath the only tree in the courtyard - though it’s more of a sapling, still tiny by tree standards. “I’m surprised about that too. I thought only Tubbo had the magic bee touch.”

“Tubbo doesn’t have a magic bee touch.” Tommy rolls his eyes. “Most animals seem to hate him. I’m surprised he’s only been stung once handling this colony.”

“It’s a strangely well behaved colony,” Phil agrees. Wilbur, seated on the grass beside him, nods. His eyes are far off.

“Maybe a little too well behaved,” Tommy says dubiously as Clementine begins to engage in one of her favorite activities - chewing things in her mouth.

Things which, in this case, include the tiny black and yellow bees, fuzz and all. Tommy watches in mild fascination as she snaps one out the air and the others barely react, still bumbling around dazedly among the flowers beside her.

Someone clears their throat. “Could you please tell your pet to stop eating *my* pets?”

Ranboo nearly whips his head into a tree branch. Tommy doesn’t react nearly as harshly, but he does stiffen in shock as everyone in the courtyard turns to face a lone figure standing on the pebbled path.

Tubbo merely raises an eyebrow back.

## Chapter End Notes

hnnnn i was hoping chapters would get shorter as we approach the end not longer but whatever

the mindset of sbi being willing to sacrifice so much for each other, a sense of worth slowly developed through their backstory and redeveloped through the course of this fic - some could argue it’s not really a good thing to have. like, the saying “heroes would sacrifice you to save the world, and villains would sacrifice the world to save you.” in this case, sbi would absolutely be classified as villains

listen no one ever said their healing arc was perfect in the “they eventually get as good as they possibly can get way”. there’s still what could be considered problematic aspects of it - it’s just that it’s not directed towards each other. the focus of this fic has always been sbi healing themselves and their relationships with each other - this doesn’t extend as much to other characters. nothing can be perfect, and they’ve decided who they’ll spend their time and words for. that’s a point to keep in mind, not just for considering, for example, how techno’s compartmentalized and derealized killing enough that he would totally blow up another country if he thought that would keep his family safe, but also for the less murderous but no less meaningful other relationships - wilbur with fundy and niki, for example

i know the fundy and niki reunion with wilbur and tommy seems a bit too small and just,, feels a bit lacking in terms of what they’ve resolved with each other? a big problem is that i couldn’t have developed any part of their relationships beyond what wilbur or tommy has thought, and that makes it difficult to narratively build up to that point. at least i prepared a narrative reason for it, as mentioned above. let’s just say this isn’t the last time wilbur and tommy ever see them

again, even if it might take another 10 years and they'll have the time to continue conversations in the far future. just not in this fic.

that being said im still unsatisfied with this chapter but oh well after looking at it a bit i dont think i can really take it another way

also, also, yes those bees have been bred over a long period of time to be as docile as possible. first their ancestors were just normal domesticated honeybees bred so its easier to get honey from them, but lets just say a few hundred years ago a few nobles in the SMP got bored and decided they wanted ultra-cute and harmless bees to make ideal pets, and started a breeding project specifically for that, which has led to a few specific new species of bees that basically wont sting even if you're slamming a fist into their nest, even though they still have stingers and some venom. obviously they wouldnt last long at all in the wild but thats why they're a human-made captive pet species

they're worse at producing honey than normal domesticated honeybees since they dont defend the nest at all and are basically wimps out in the wild when collecting nectar.

# the best of times, the worst of crimes

## Chapter Notes

i was sick for most of this but its here yayyy

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

He's in a suit. A suit so very similar to the one he had often worn while beside Schlatt, in his shadow, eyes always darting-

Tubbo is in a black suit, white dress shirt beneath, like Techno's but without the comforting finesse, tie green and hair coiffed too perfectly.

"You look weird," is Tommy's next words.

"*You* look weird," Tubbo shoots back . "And you're even taller! How is that fair?"

And his eyes are a slight too wild and *it's so fucking familiar*.

And they're both rushing to each other, each step faster-

"Do any of you know when-" Techno's voice trails off as everyone turns to stare at his looming figure in the doorway, where Tubbo had just passed not a minute prior. "Am... am I interrupting something?"

Tommy laughs weakly, slowing to a stumble. "Wil, could you and Phil..."

"Y-yeah," Wilbur says. He and Tubbo exchange a long glance which Tommy can't catch even a glimpse of - and then, he's dragging a slightly confused looking Phil towards Techno, and the doorway.

Phil waves to Tubbo as he's pulled back into the White House interior. Tubbo waves back.

Just like that, Tommy is alone with Tubbo and Ranboo. Almost.

"And you too," Tommy says to Clementine. She blinks at him, barks, and continues to chew the few bees she has in her mouth.

"She can stay," Tubbo says. "She has to pay for eating my bees."

Tommy gawks at him, offended on her behalf. "She's a dog!"

"So that means you're paying?"

Tommy shoves Tubbo lightly, and stalks back to the tree to slump down next to Ranboo.

"Fuck you," he scowls. "Why did I want to see you so badly again?"

Besides him, Ranboo muffles a laugh.

“Shut up, ender boy, you don’t get to fucking-”

This is when Clementine decides to stop chewing on bees, and instead bound over to lick at Tubbo’s black dress pants. A glob of saliva trails down the cloth.

Tommy bursts into laughter, as does Ranboo.

Tubbo sighs, stomps over, and flings himself into Tommy’s arms.

And - oh. Tubbo is warm.

Warm, and alive and breathing right in Tommy’s arms, smelling faintly of lavender. His hair is glazed with shine, but the beneath is coarse and white-edged.

He’s here. In Tommy’s arms.

Tubbo is here. With him. Warm. Alive.

The courtyard is quiet for a long moment, save for steady breaths and the light hum of bees.

“I missed you.” The words fall from Tommy’s mouth faster than he processes them. He doesn’t care, though - he would have said them anyway.

Tubbo blinks up at him.

“Me too,” he says.

For some reason, Tommy’s heart still aches.

~\*~

The paintings judge him.

They’re usually of landscapes, snapshots of the country. These accuse him of their destruction - demand his accountability.

Wilbur denies them all, without the energy for either vehemence or slathered self-righteousness, but firmly stonewalled nonetheless. He has no room for repentance to New L’Manberg, deserved as it may be.

The White House has a fondness for portraits as well, however. Those layer a different kind of demand.

Both him and Schlatt have portraits still - which he guesses was a rather controversial decision. Distinct, tiny black holes in both their foreheads suggest they were used as dartboards at one point. Tubbo’s portrait follows Schlatt’s, like a sad procession of funerary men, all their lives exsanguinated by the presidency.

He wonders if he should go check on Tommy, Ranboo, and Tubbo. They’ve been in the courtyard for a while.

Phil and Techno have no plans to do so, he knows. They want to look at the pretty architecture; and then leave.

Tommy wants to talk with Tubbo, figure things out; and then leave.

Wilbur's already said his piece to - well, besides Niki and Fundy, who else is there? No one, really. He hadn't let himself get close to many people even before the exile.

He hadn't left Phil's house all those years ago to make friends or start a family. He had left for a grand, history-turning legacy, and a legacy he has left.

Wilbur Soot - the villain, the fool, the visionary gone mad. Who met an end fitting for his own hubris.

His delusion has always been his flaw - his great flaw.

What he has here, this life with his family, somehow still loved - it is a coda. Not even. It doesn't belong with the rest of the story, doesn't fit any narrative cohesion. Tragic protagonists - that is, *tragic* tragic ones - die. They do not receive redemption arcs. They are not those other kinds of villains.

But. This is not a redemption arc. Wilbur has decreed so himself, to himself - he owes New L'Manberg a debt he has no plans to repay. This is... a director's cut. An author's secret lament, hidden away from the public canon.

This is the addition that makes no sense, that fulfills no purpose except to muddle the waters of narrative further. An unneeded, and distinctly unwelcome addition. To be hidden away, to languish in a dark, dusty corner like a letter half penned with fantasies.

Wilbur smiles. He's always delighted in bending the script.

~\*~

"Clementine's bigger than I imagined," Tubbo says.

Tommy blinks. "*That's* what you bring up?"

"You write about her a lot," Tubbo defends. He lowers a hand to stroke Clementine's head. "See? I don't even have to lean down to pet her!"

"That's because you're fucking short."

"Hey! You don't need to rub it in!"

"She's a from a breed known for being good at swimming," Ranboo says. He clears his throat. "Also, *I* need to bend down to pet her."

For some reason, he then feels the need to demonstrate this. Tommy resists the urge to scoff.

"Enough about my attention hog of a hound," he says. "What's interesting, Tubso? Big man?"

"Besides me trying put out a metaphorical fire every other hour?" Tubbo shrugs. "I daydream about retirement a lot. When I have the time to daydream."

Tommy nods, somewhat distractedly. "Once you've secured your place as the best president in the history of New L'Manberg, huh?"

Tubbo laughs. "I don't know. Technically, I'm the first president. I don't think anyone around here considers Wilbur or Schlatt as real presidents, even if their portraits are still up."

“Post-term excommunication,” Ranboo says.

“That.”

“’s easier to be best at something when you’re the first,” Tommy shrugs. “Hard to compete with legends.”

Tubbo actually blinks at that, slow. “You think I’m a legend?”

“Not now,” Tommy clarifies. “You’re too...”

He scrunches his nose. “Your existence too *personal* for that right now. But eventually, yeah. Legendary president to clear up all the fuck-ups the legendary villain Wilbur Soot created. Wouldn’t be surprised if future tellings left out the part about Wilbur leading the original rebellion in the first place.”

“Wilbur’s your brother,” Tubbo says. He looks mildly alarmed, which makes Tommy mildly alarmed, because he’s not quite sure why Tubbo is. He pushes on regardless - that’s something he’s gotten rather good at.

“Yeah,” Tommy says. Because yes - last he checked, Wilbur is, indeed, his brother. “He’s also New L’Manberg’s villain. Given that he - you know. Blew up the capital. Doubt the history books will be too flattering about that.”

“Uh - right.” Tubbo studies Tommy for a long moment - the scrutinizing look that yanks hard at a string of familiarity inside of him. For some brief, overwhelming reason, Tommy almost wants to trip over giving Tubbo another hug again.

“Tommy’s used to the idea of me being a villain,” a voice says. They all turn to see Wilbur at the edge of the courtyard, hands hidden in his cloak. His hood is up.

No one looks surprised.

“Villain to the rest of the world,” Tommy feels the need to clarify. “We’ve kind of given up on what the world thinks, though.”

“Yes, clearly,” Tubbo says, but something strains at his voice. It’s answered in the next few words; “including Wilbur, right?”

Wilbur tilts his head. “I don’t really care what the world says about me, now or into the far future, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“You don’t,” Tubbo repeats. “Even if your story is told... wrong?”

A rueful smile curls from beneath the hood’s shadow. “Tubbo, you should know by now that there is no wrong way to tell a story. To recount history, maybe - but not to tell stories.” A exhale, so quiet Tommy almost misses it. “And we all know I am destined to become either a story, or nothing at all.”

That is Wilbur Soot, to the world that hates him. Not to Tommy, though - *never* to Tommy.

“I...” Tubbo sighs. “I suppose that applies to me as well, doesn’t it?”

“Ah, mythification. The bane of all historians.” Wilbur chuckles, and takes a small step back. “You still have years of presidency left to contend with, though. And look on the bright side! After



whenever you decide to quit, it's not your problem anymore."

"You can come visit *us*," Tommy adds.

"Oh, I hope," Ranboo murmurs.

Tubbo nods, though he looks slightly troubled. The look is quickly shaken off, however, in favor of something more resolved.

"Wilbur," he says. "I suppose an apology would be too hard to wrangle from you?"

"I can say '*I'm sorry*' until I'm actually dead, but that wouldn't mean anything," Wilbur says. A frown. "I guess - well - I *am* sorry for handing the presidency off to Tommy, knowing he would probably hand it off to you."

He pauses, and sighs. "To be honest, I wasn't expecting you to remain president. Thought you would have thrown it at Quackity or someone else, or the SMP would reabsorb L'Manberg before anything else significant happened."

Tubbo's shoulders tighten, slightly.

"For what it's worth," Wilbur says, quieter, "I'm *am* very impressed. Most other people in your situation, including me, would not have been able to accomplish even a quarter of anything you have, and you know how precarious that balance is. I'm not saying this as any consolation - I'm saying this just to let you know, from me, that I think you've handled your situation remarkably well."

"And I guess that does mean *something*, doesn't it?" Tubbo says, worrying his lip. "From *the* Wilbur Soot. Leader of the original rebellion. Founder of L'Manberg."

"It's what you think it should be." Wilbur shrugs. "You probably still want my head on a pike, or are pretty close to wanting it, but by this point I feel like I might as well just take the opportunity to say these things. Which is why I'm dropping by here again."

"Sure." Tubbo sighs, slowly. Tommy watches him methodically drain all the tension from his shoulders, one silent, practiced count at a time.

"I *am* sorry for what you've been put through, though," Wilbur suddenly says. "For what I coerced you into. It won't change anything, really, but I should say it. You've always been bright."

"And too dedicated for my own good," Tubbo says. He blinks. "You are too, you know. We just choose different things to dedicate ourselves to."

Wilbur inclines his head, once - and then, he's gone.

"He keeps doing that," Tommy grumbles, not even a few seconds later. He's let too many silences linger to be complacent in the inevitable awkwardness of this one. "Just - *whoosh* - and then he's gone. Like, '*ooh, look at me, I'm like a ghost, I'm can disappear silently, so mysterious-*'"

"I don't think he's even trying to be like that," Ranboo says. "He just - *does*."

"Yeah," Tommy says, fondness slipping into his breath of the syllable. "Yeah, he really - he really *is*. You know?"

“Of course I know,” Tubbo says, with just a hint of amusement. “I fought 2 wars and worked in his government too.”

Oh. Ah. Right. That was a thing that happened.

“You’ve changed a lot. Since then.”

“So have you,” Tubbo says mildly. “You’ve grown *even taller*, for one, while I’m still stuck like this. Have I mentioned that before?”

Tommy bites back a snort.

“Imagine needing to literally look up to people,” Ranboo says.

Tubbo elbows him lightly. “You’re one to talk, Mr. I-don’t-make-eye-contact.”

“It’s weird and humans are too obsessed with the symbolism of eyes,” Ranboo defends. “I don’t get why you guys don’t give more attention to a superior body part.”

“Like what?” Tubbo asks, and looks like he’s straining himself from saying anything more.

“Uh - like the tongue.”

Tommy laughs incredulously. “The *tongue*?”

When Ranboo opens his mouth, he’s very abruptly reminded of the fact that the hybrid’s tongue is forked, split black and white down the middle, and longer than Clementine’s tail.

“Holy shit,” Tubbo says, raising an eyebrow as Ranboo curls the entire appendage down to his waist. “I’d forgotten you can do that.”

Ranboo grins, and snaps his tongue back in one quick motion. “Great party trick.”

“Please don’t do that around the White House parties,” Tubbo snorts.

“Yeah. Not exactly the same crowd as Sanctuary,” Tommy adds. They both falter, however, at the brief look of longing that crosses Ranboo’s face.

“It’s - it’s fine though!” Ranboo says quickly, catching on. “I mean - you know, I get to be Tubbo’s new best friend. Since I’ll be here all the time and Tommy’s on a different continent.”

“Letters just won’t cut it, huh?” Tommy jumps on, shaking his head in mock sadness. “Tubbo, see? I always knew Ranboo would be the downfall of me. Stealing you away, getting between our friendship. I’m downgrading him to an 8 out of 10.”

“On the contrary, that tongue gets him a 12 out of 10 for me,” Tubbo counters. “Ranboo, you are totally jumpscaring Quackity with that one day.”

They both snicker over Ranboo’s incredulous question of “you guys were grading me?”

“Don’t worry,” Tommy says. “I still think you’re better than Tubbo. One of you don’t snore.”

“I don’t snore!” Tubbo protests, moving on the hidden confirmation. “Neither does Ranboo. So it’s just you, Tommy.”

“You both snore,” Ranboo says flatly, but his lips quirk up in a smile.

“Tubbo does, I don’t,” Tommy says, at the same time Tubbo says the same thing with his own name replaced.

Tommy is half tempted to challenge him to prove it, but instead he whistles sharply and called a distantly prancing Clementine over to him.

“Clementine,” Tommy, trying and failing to sound serious as she trots up to him with a tilt of her head. “Does Tubbo snore? Bark of it’s a yes.”

Clementine blinks, slowly, and turns to Tubbo.

“I don’t snore,” Tubbo repeats, crossing his arms.

Clementine barks once, to him, and scampers off to chase another bee.

“Hah!” Tommy says triumphantly.

“No, she was saying yes to me,” Tubbo argues. “She responded yes to *my* declaration of not snoring.”

“She’s *my* dog, of course she agrees with me-”

“You just admitted to consulting a biased source!”

“You two,” Ranboo sighs.

Tommy grins back at him, a shade too delighted.

It feels good to joke with Tubbo like this, again, like how they once did. Ranboo fits between them, with them, almost seamlessly. In another world, they were easy friends with little to lose and everything to experience together.

Despite the inevitability of their circumstances hanging like a guillotine over their heads, Tommy enjoys this. Lets himself enjoy this. Right now, in this moment, there’s little stopping them from bantering and doing stupid little tricks and laughing among the bees and hand-planted flowers. That will have to do for now.

~\*~

“Didn’t take you guys as the type to play poker,” Wilbur says, gingerly stepping into the canoe. The chips are a shining gold too, probably some old buttons Phil had laying around his ender chest.

Techno and Phil both shrug vaguely.

“They make good quality cards around here,” Techno says. “I could slice a man’s neck with them.”

“You could slice a man’s neck with just about anything,” Wilbur rolls his eyes. But he sits down, and snuggles closer against Techno’s side. The canoe rocks slightly.

“Let’s refrain from the slicing for now,” Phil says mildly. “I’d like to finish this game before getting blood all over it.”

Wilbur laughs. “Deal me a hand, will you? I think Tommy will be busy for a while.”

~\*~

He's not sure how long they "frolic in the (White House courtyard) fields", as some might say, but time passes and all good things must come to an end. Hopefully to begin other good things, but Tommy isn't always so hopeful these days.

They've enjoyed this time, though. And there's still yet more time in the next few days. In the end, that is what matters.

"We should-" he jumps as Clementine shoves her head against his ankle, growling. It's her friendly, attention demanding kind of growl, that signals she's had enough of just sitting around looking at pretty things. "Uh - Wilbur and Techno and Phil - they would-"

"The mysterious Tommy Innit shouldn't be left in the White House too long." Tubbo nods. "Got it."

"What?" Mysterious?

But Tubbo is already dragging him towards the doors, Ranboo snickering quietly as he follows close behind.

"You realize no one had a single fucking clue where you went off to, right?" Tubbo says. "I mean, everyone thought Wilbur was dead, but your very alive ass stuck around a few days after the 16th before disappearing. You told me and literally no one else."

"It's going to become an national mystery," Ranboo says, sounding far too delighted. "Where did Founding Father Tommy Innit go? Was he kidnapped? Killed? Turned into a crow?"

"I might as well have." Tommy rolls his eyes. As funny as it would be to reveal himself, say, 30 years later, he has no plans to do so. Just like Wilbur, he has left his debts and dues to L'Manberg behind for good.

"They'll write books about this one day," Tubbo says, throwing up his arms. His voice echoes through the empty hallways of the White House as he continues leading down corridor after corridor to who-knows-where.

"And how do you know that?" Tommy asks.

"'cause I'll write one, obviously," Tubbo says. He nods, self-assuredly. "What speculations do you want, Tommy? What if I said Dream actually kidnapped you and-"

"Please. At this point, I'm more likely to kidnap him," Tommy scoffs.

They reach the a set of doors which Tommy recognizes leads to the White House's main lobby. The place is strictly off limits to the public, so when Tubbo opens the door he doesn't expect to see anyone besides a few guards and the secretary at the front desk.

But then they step into the room, and his eyes immediately snap to a bright flash of color hunched in a chair against the far wall.

"Well," Ranboo whispers, suddenly quiet. "I don't think the Dream-related speculations are so unlikely anymore."

~\*~

“President Tubbo.” Dream sounds strangely normal - or maybe he usually sounds this way, and all of Tommy’s memories of him only includes vague, venom-spitted threats because there had been little other reason for them to interact.

That’s probably it, actually.

Dream’s mask is facing away from them, and Tommy takes this chance to not-so-subtly shift until Ranboo’s tall frame covers his. He makes a shushing motion at Clementine, who slinks behind them all. She bobs her head up and down, and not a sound escapes her - this had been one of the few things they’d made sure to properly train her in.

Ranboo points a finger towards the hallway, where Tommy should really be ducking into to properly stay out of sight until Dream leaves, but Tommy merely shrugs. He counts at least 12 guards also in the lobby, now that he’s gotten over his initial shock, as well as the irritated looking secretary at the reception who isn’t even trying to hide the knife she has held just below desk level.

“Dream,” Tubbo says. Some semblance of victory curls around Tommy’s throat at the address - people in the SMP proper are supposed to call him something ridiculous like *“The High Dream, twenty-first of his name, Slayer of blah blah blah blagh”* and other such nonsense.

Wilbur was the one who had demystified him by stripping away all those titles, called him just “Dream” until the rest of L’Manberg had followed suit. Tommy suspects that is one of the reasons Dream held such a grudge against him back during Pogtopia; to the point where he had personally shown up multiple times to goad Wilbur further into paranoia.

Anyway. It’s good to see one legacy of Wilbur’s New L’Manberg still honors.

Dream reveals no resentment now, however, when he continues. “I thought I should let you know that King Eret’s name needs to be added onto future documents between the two nations. There’s a new law coming into effect in the SMP soon that elevates the King’s position to a similar level of mine.”

He doesn’t give any hint of fury at this blatant check on his power, though he’s no doubt simmering about it on the inside. Tommy suppresses the urge to snicker at the thought.

“And you should take this.” From his cloak, Dream produces a white folder stuffed to the brim in documents. “A copy of the law, and some formal declaration from the SMP nobles. Among other things.” He tilts his head, ever so slightly, towards the guards all staring at him.

“Why didn’t you ask someone to deliver it for you?” Tubbo asks.

“My company here consists of 5 people, including myself,” Dream says, with only a hint of dryness. “They’re all on the canoe outside, but as weapons of SMP citizens aren’t allowed inside the White House, there’s no point sending one of them in here when I can do it myself.”

That... *is* a consistency of Dream that Tommy has noticed, actually. He’s surprisingly involved in the details for the ruler of a nation as large as the SMP. It goes to the point where they’ve personally encountered each other in battle before, though neither really engaged the other until that bow duel.

The results would have been too messy.

As the bow duel had shown.

Tommy forces down a cold lump at the reminder of that day he almost died. Again.

Dream hasn't noticed Tommy. His mask, the stupid daisy-white with cherry pits for eyes and a smile like a curved black earthworm, somehow just as wriggly - is still trained on Tubbo.

Then, it's towards the doors.

"That is all," Dream says, standing up and striding to the exit. "We will be leaving in 2 days, at dawn."

4 guards follow him. Tommy takes this opportunity to slip out from behind Ranboo and trail them through the doors as well, ignoring Tubbo's spluttered protest and Ranboo's sigh. Soft paw steps scramble after him.

It's a beautiful day outside. Skies clear, wind cool, seabirds gawking. Tommy supposes he should be glad the canoes are parked around the back and sides of the White House island, instead of the front.

He steels himself, and increases his speed to a near jog. Clementine races to match his pace.

Now or never. He hadn't expected such a opportunity, had thought things would be a bit more difficult, but also that he would have more time.

A breath, deep as he can manage while in a near-run.

"Hey, Dream!" Tommy calls.

Dream freezes. His cloak sways forth for a hovering moment, like a phantom that has moved on without its wearer, before settling back into breezy flutters.

The mask turns, ever so slightly.

Tommy has his hood down. As he blurs by Dream, he pulls from his own cloak a solid black disc and tosses it directly at the smiley-mask face.

Dream catches it in a near effortless motion. Of course he does. But by the time his movements begin to propel him towards anything else, Tommy has disappeared around a corner, already on his way back towards his family's canoe.

Clementine makes a small whining sound as they move - she sounds jealous. Probably because Dream got to play fetch today, and she didn't.

He suppresses another bout of laughter. Throwing the disc was about the most exhilarating thing he's done in a while.

If there weren't guards blocking his way, Dream could probably catch up to him and demand an explanation, or anything else. However, New L'Manberg's people distrust him enough as it is - and so, after the quick word Tommy had instructed Ranboo to give, he will simply have to return to his canoe and be guided straight back to his own assigned lodgings, to be under watch 24/7 once again.

Dream can still sneak out of nearly any place he wants, but dragging anyone else along with him would get them both caught almost immediately. That, of course, is also something Tommy is banking on.

They reach the loading docks. Clementine jumps into the canoe so hard water splashes all over a sprawl of cards, as well as his family. Tommy follows suit.

“Oh come on,” Wilbur whines. “I was *this* close to winning.”

“I take it things went well?” Techno asks, perking his head up. *Things*, of course, plural - there were a lot of fucking *things* going on today.

“Of course they did,” Tommy grins. “And green bitch was there.”

Wilbur lets out a long whistle. Techno takes a bucket and throws out the small pool of water gathered at the bottom of the canoe.

Phil sighs, and begins gathering up the soaked deck of cards. “Sounds like we’ll have an interesting day tomorrow.”

## Chapter End Notes

plot?? in this fic? more likely than you think :D

not really satisfied with this chapter either?? i mean its the all important bench trio chapter with the first real dream appearance but ehh?? idk y’all tell me but at this point there's only so many ways the fic can go

also,,, sigh at least this chapter is closer to 4k than 5k but i reserve the right to have 1.5k word chapters until the end from now on (jk but really that would be nice but really lets be real thats not happening lmao but i mean really that would be a nice bit of symmetry since the first few chapters of this fic have like 1.5k words or something but really hahah the Scenes i have to write have already been planned and it does not look like ill have the luxury

band camp is still killing me by the way and i am just Tired and also body wont stop sneezing or feeling bad and i wanna finish this)

note that formal attire in this au’s current time, at least in new lmanberg, is apparently equivalent to modern western formal attire. i mean its not like it breaks any rules, so it works out? does mean formal attire in new lmanberg 300 years later will look very different tho lol. im basing it off the dsmp skins, obviously

a surprise next chapter. shoutout to anyone who can guess what it is.

# the terrible fire of old regrets is honey on my tongue

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

*“Hello, green bitch. It is I, Tommy Innit, who is so much better than you because I actually have a fucking life.*

*One way or another, this disc came into your possession. Maybe it fell out of the sky. Maybe a dog attacked you with it. Maybe I chucked it at your head like a frisbee. If that last one was the case, I hope it broke your mask. Probably too much to ask for, but eh.*

*Anyway, I hope you are having a very not fun time right now. But, more importantly - we both know you’ve been looking for me. Very obsessively. Man, has anyone ever told you how creepy that is? Your life is so sad.*

*And it must be so very frustrating to know how close, and yet so far, I am.*

*Smile.*

*Well. I could zip off to the unknown and leave you hanging again, green bitch, but luckily for you - well. I have some things I’d like to say myself. You know. The usual.*

*Let’s not pretend your little manhunt for me isn’t a factor.*

*So. Meet me at the caves on the 18th, at noon. Or 19th. Or 20th. Whichever day this gets to you, really. Meet me at the next available noon that’s not, like, 3 fucking hours from now or something. I’ll time it right.*

*What caves, you might ask? The cliffside caves about two dozen leagues outside of L’Manberg. You know - the ones near where the Battle of the Lake was fought?*

*Be at the normal entrance. If you show up with weapons or other people, I definitely won’t be there. But of course, it won’t be just the two of us - how stupid do you think I am?*

*This could be your chance, Dream. You don’t hold the power here, not anymore. Looking back, you never held as much power as I once thought you did.*

*I’ll be waiting.*

*So very sincerely,*

*Tommy Innit.”*

The disc pops back out the jukebox like a molerat playing peek-a-boo, its purpose fulfilled.

That’s what this has felt like. The most elaborate, space-twisted game he has ever experienced. Space-twisted, time-docked.



L'Manberg's stars are different from Essempi's. Already, his yearning for his city - for his *home* - swells like spring floods within him. Ever higher, ever closer.

Dream rests his head on a knuckle, leans into the windowsill, watches the stars twinkle against void black, milk-dusted white.

He can't return home, not yet. Another anchor rests him solidly within these grounds for now.

"Dream?"

"Go back to sleep," Dream responds without hesitation. "We have a long day tomorrow."

"*You* have a long day tomorrow. *I* get to laze around the White House trying fancy food all day." Sleep laces George's voice - but still, that deceptively dry humor dusts every word.

"Long day tomorrow," Dream repeats. For in the White House of New L'Manberg, every word is edged with poison and every offer a curse in disguise.

"Not all of us are as socially inept as you."

*Not all of us are as wondrously calculated as you*, Dream doesn't say.

"You should still go back to sleep," he responds instead.

"It would be a lot easier if someone closed the curtains, stopped creaking all the floorboards, and *turned off the Primedamned jukebox*."

The floorboards of this guest room were most definitely designed to creak that obnoxiously. Even now, Dream can hear the *ba-dum, ba-dum* heartbeats of the guards just outside the doorway, and on the roof above, watching the window with weathered resolve.

It's good that the jukebox's volume is adjustable. Tommy - *Tommy* - his message would be no more than indistinguishable warbles to any human outside a feet of radius, though the guards would still be alarmed by the sudden addition of voice.

Just enough to heighten heartbeats. Not enough to call in a suspicion. In the middle of the night, more than a few of them would resent such a thing.

Dream is petty, sometimes. They can't do anything about it.

"*Dreeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeam*."

"You heard the message." This is huge. What has it been - 14, 15 years?

This is the most critical chance by far.

"It's midnight. Right now, the only thing I care about is my beauty sleep." Blankets shift. "Go to fucking bed, Dream. The mental breakdowns can wait 'til morning."

Dream smothers down a sigh, and slides the disc out the jukebox. He tucks it into a pocket of his nightclothes - drawers are not to be trusted around here.

Then, he crawls into bed. They gave them 2 beds in this room, and 3 in the other for his personal guards. Not very personal, this way, not that Dream cares much.

The 2-bed situation may be either a relief or disappointment. Dream isn't sure yet. George will probably slap him if he asks.

With another sigh, as quiet and drawn as he can make it, Dream falls onto the mattress.

Sleep comes easy. Starless nights are a domain of his own, after all.

~\*~

"Stay safe," Dream says. This is met with an eye roll.

"I'm not the one chasing after the mystery disc message," George says. He stuffs another cream puff into his mouth. "Try not to die."

Dream hums. "I don't think either of us are looking for that, surprisingly enough."

And in either case - if Tommy tries to kill him, like always, there is the unlucky chance he will succeed. But there always is. He's learned to stop letting worry stay every risky action, if only because nothing would ever get done that way.

Tommy has hinted at protection, too.

Mercenaries? Someone closer? Ever since Wilbur died in his explosions, Tommy has not been seen. It's very possible he has gathered new attachments.

Well. No use dawdling - one way or another, there will be some answers spilled today.

Dream adjusts his hood. Then, he bunches his knees and swings onto a nearby low-hanging roof. George pretends to look surprised to the guards tailing them from the shadows, and to Dream's own entourage.

He's off.

~\*~

It normally requires half a day's travel on consistent horseback to reach the cliffside caves of - well, he's forgotten the name.

Below the site of the Battle of the Lake and the stand-off between his forces and Wilbur's are many, many tunnels worn from when the sea's levels had been much higher. Neither side ever utilized them for tactics - the war for L'Manberg Independence had lasted too short for anyone to consider mapping the place.

It had been cut short when he almost killed Tommy.

Of course, he didn't want to. He had aimed to be non-fatal.

The wind had blown the arrow ever so slightly off course. Then, it had pierced stomach instead of soft flesh.

Dream doesn't need horses to travel. He calls upon the ocean within him, rising up, gripping, claws through the currents in the underneath where it is dark and empty and oh so right-

And he is there.

It is an hour before noon. He had left George 2 hours ago. He's made good time.

The entrance to the caves - from atop the cliffs, anyway, the main entrance - is hidden by twisting willows and white-flowered shrubs determined to prick him dry. Dream does not care to squabble with plants, so he shoves them all aside and steps his boots into the grass without hesitation.

The cave is large, spacious, and the tunnels that lead further down narrowed to the point of almost laughable comparison. Everything tells an intruder, plain and simple, to remain resting in this tall-caverned area and never gaze into the abyss of the further beyond.

Dream swipes a leaf from his hood, sits down on the hard stone, slightly damp and green-stained, and waits. The decision is not his, after all; despite how much it irks him, he must play along.

Small sacrifices, in the grand scheme of things.

~\*~

Tommy Innit is late by 10 minutes. He comes with a pale-furred hound at his side, strangely chipper.

The hound, that is. Tommy looks anything but chipper.

"We're going on an adventure," he says, before he's ducking into the tunnels and Dream has little choice but to follow.

He narrows his mask to better fit the tight corridors. There is damp rock scraping his hood, puddles of water and gravel and algae dragging his boots. Darkness ahead parts only by the lantern Tommy carries within him.

Someone follows them from behind, also shadowed. Dream has only faint clues as to who it might be. Normal guards can not walk so softly, as though the washed andesite beneath is no more than a moss carpet.

He follows Tommy regardless. There may be little avenue for accomplishment here, but he's still confident in his ability to make a swift exit if necessary.

"Nice rocks, aren't they?" Tommy says as the tunnel begins to widen. Dream's cloak almost snags on a tree root.

"They're rocks," he says flatly.

"People have lived here to centuries," Tommy continues, barreling through the dry attitude without care. "Revolutions around the waves and tunnels, not day and night. Not like us. Apparently, some spend their entire lives in darkness. They come to know the caves and tunnels so intimately it's said they would could easily marathons across them in less time than a sighted person does over flat land."

"I've heard many myths over my life, Tommy."

"It's said that some of them become so... *fused* with the earth and stone, they could move those elements by sheer force of will."

"That is impossible."

Dream catches the faintest flicker of a grin on Tommy's expression. "I know. But - most myths start from somewhere. Somewhere which holds some grain of truth."

He stops, presses a finger into the tunnel wall. It comes away wet and muddy.

Distantly, Dream finds himself remembering that these these tunnels - some of them, at least - are known for instability. Mud is a weak structural support.

“I know shit about this fucking place, of course,” Tommy says wryly. His dog, still dutifully following her master into this ridiculous labyrinth of a place and showing no fear despite it, barks.

A warning? Or merely a way to stretch her throat muscles?

“If you know so little, why take us so deep?” Dream asks instead.

“I still know more than you.”

Ah. That is, indeed, a valid reason.

The dog barks again, this time quieter. Her ears are perked up. Tommy bends down to scratch her, briefly.

The shadow far behind them stills.

A coldness rises in Dream’s throat. He wrestles it down, hard, before it interferes any further.

He misses George already. George always knows how to drive off the coldness. Sappnap does too, or did - but Sappnap has not curled around them for a while and Dream knows somewhere deep and unforgiving inside him that he likely never will again.

“Lead on, then,” he says. Tommy straightens, and continues. His hound follows him, loyal to the end, loyal even in the face of the great unknown. Her tongue lolls out, her eyes shine. Excited.

Dream wishes he shares that enthusiasm.

~\*~

Gemstones shine in the darkness.

That is a lie, except when it isn’t.

There is light in this cavern. Light, and gemstones, and the quiet *drip drip* of water, harmonic ringtones singing from every corner.

The world is dark, here, but there is light. Shimmering purple, faint, crystalline and soft and everything treacherously fault-lined, ready to shatter.

“Someone has probably died in this cave,” Tommy says.

“I am aware,” Dream repeats, responds.

Tommy shrugs. Moves to sit down on a nearby rock. Crystals a clear deep blue fan from the stone like ancient wings. His hound - dog - *pet* - plops herself down beside him, nose poking another shard of violet.

Dream does not sit. Instead he glides to a halt at the edge of a puddle.

His reflection is more disheveled than he would like. With an internal flicker of discomfort, he rearranges it into something more... concentrated.

"You've been busy," he says finally, when the silence has settled. He looks up, back to Tommy.

Tommy shrugs. "I wouldn't say *busy*."

"You've been busy changing," Dream clarifies. He resists the urge to look away, and wonders when this has become so hard.

Tommy shrugs, again. His dog thumps her tail.

"Guess I have changed a lot, yeah."

"I'm not surprised."

Tommy looks up, at that. The stone beneath grows colder. "Why?"

"It's in our nature," Dream says. "To change. Especially now."

He watches carefully. Tommy's expression reveals little; his weight shifts, to the left.

"Our nature?"

Oh.

He - he doesn't know. Not yet. He doesn't know yet. Unless it's denial, but there's also something more.

This bit of information is - *leverage*.

He's not sure why the thought doesn't thrill him anywhere near as much as it used to.

Dream had much leverage over Tommy, once. He doesn't anymore.

He wonders when he began thinking in terms of *power* and *leverage* and *revenge*, for someone he had once held close to his chest and promised protection every moment.

Maybe this reality is why.

"I know you're there," Dream says, suddenly unable to stave the dull tiredness from creeping into each breadth of word. He forces down the bile of his throat, closes that off tight as ship knots, grounded. "You can stop hiding. Let's not pretend I don't know where you are."

Not that the list of potential candidates had been very high to begin with; but the person who shifts into the crystal-light is, very decidedly, not anyone Dream had expected.

What he first sees is pink hair, wavy, pale, and a flash of dark blue, and-

"Hello, Dream," Technoblade says. "It's been a while."

~\*~

In hindsight, he shouldn't have been too surprised.

“You’re not human,” Techno says.

“I believe that is common knowledge, yes,” Dream responds. He sags down against a stalagmite. It digs into him a little, more than it would a human, like a thousand half-cut barbs. He cannot bring himself to harden.

“And you said ‘*our nature*’, when you talked to Tommy.”

“True.”

“So that would imply Tommy’s not human.”

Dream laughs. It’s a pathetic sound, the choked cumulation of every sleepless night and dead-ended search and sharp throbs of panic and despair and *failure failure failure he’s failed he’s failed and nothing will every fix it and nothing will ever be right and-*

And everything he has endured for this moment.

A shattered breath.

“*Of course* Tommy’s not human.”

A choke.

What a sick, sick fucking twist of events.

Tommy’s eyes are wide. There is fire in them. Fire and destruction and a life blown to pieces.

For the first time, Dream registers fully, truly, that he had killed Tommy’s brother. Wilbur’s death had been, in extremely large part, his fault.

Wilbur was Tommy’s brother.

The statement is ridiculous. Has always been. It does not make it less true.

*Wilbur fucking Soot was Tommy’s brother.*

“What do you mean?” Tommy asks. His voice quivers, but there is a demand in there. A quiet, determined demand that refuses to be extinguished. “What are you implying about me?”

That’s good, Dream supposes. He drags a hand up the mask, shifts again. Sighs.

“Have you ever tried to find, Tommy,” he mutters, “your biological parents?”

Tommy tenses. Techno does not, though he stalks closer to throw a hand on his shoulder. And oh, of course he would, they had to have known each other somehow, they had to be-

Dream’s seen that move many times. With Wilbur.

Wilbur, hugging Tommy. Wilbur, singing songs by the fire while Tommy listens. Wilbur, throwing a hand on Tommy’s shoulder, around him, proclaiming them brothers and *he had no right-*

The hound barks a growl. A warning.

All the past fury sloughs off of him in a single drawn slump. Left is only a canvas of flaked paint and rejected designs.

“You know what I mean,” Dream says, though the words pained him. “You know. You have to.”

Tommy clinks his fingers against crystal. *One, two, three-and four.* “Yeah.”

He’s quiet, resolved, and there is no leverage anymore. Dream has nothing on Tommy, nothing, because if there had been anything he would have been sought out long before and-

Beneath the cold shame of his heart, something like pride burns.

~\*~

“That explains almost nothing,” Techno says. He draws his cloak tighter around himself, around Tommy. He’s different too - something less burning, quieter. More grounded, attached.

“Elaborate,” Techno says.

*You will.*

Techno has a sword. Not that it matters, but - well. Dream doesn’t have a sword.

*It doesn’t matter.* He would have talked anyway. There is else nothing left to do, and Tommy should have that much.

It’s the best for both of them, even without those dues.

He would have called Tommy his son, once. Those days are over, and have been for a long time. Dream wishes he hadn’t taken so long to acknowledge the fact.

## Chapter End Notes

Dream pov was the surprise :)

fun fact, dream and scott i-organize-mcc smajor are the only 2 characters outside of sbi to have povs in this fic. tell me how these two are similar in the comments. wrong answers only.

lets just say green boi has had,,,,, some crises over the past 2 years lmao.

feel like i should address some stuff i can see coming up? like i said, im drawing purely off his season 1 characterization for this. i cant exactly acknowledge a character’s canon traits when i developed a character before those canon events happened since that would conflict with the story ive set up for them. so, just as techno isn’t a die-hard “anarchy over absolutely everything else” character in this fic because s1 hadnt established that level of commitment from him yet, dream isnt mr. “haha imma manipulate all the children and destroy my life in the process and do not have a any sense of a good priority list At All”

like im sorry if you’re upset if feels like all of dream's s2 and s3 related stuff just got chopped off him here but thats literally what happened. its also what happened with tommy, phil, techno, and wilbur, so like,,, like i said dream doesnt get to be the special exception to everything. by this

point this fic is so far removed from canon its just like ͇(˘͇)͇ these characters are au versions of their canon selves. i mean this entire fic is literally labeled au bc the entire premise of it hinges on an aspect of phil's character being different enough that he makes the conscious choice to think for a goddamn moment before literally stabbing his son to death. which i guess does break s1 characterization but like i tried to make it so that's the only part of s1 that gets broken, barring the stuff that has to get retconned because Worldbuilding Inconsistencies

i think a large part of the assumptions so many people have about dream, especially in this fic, without evidence to back it up is because most of the dsmp fandom started watching in season 2 and dont really know what season 1 dream was like. trust me, the difference is pretty noticeable if you watch and pay attention, to the point where i'd even say up to November 16th, wilbur and dream were on a pretty equal level of Have Done Bad Stuff, which i know is a super controversial statement that will get me flamed but really. they do. they both blew up nations and got possessive and aggressive and violent and controlling and used people and circumstances around them to gain power and make sure other people couldnt gain power to match them. wilbur even one-ups dream with the child manipulation in s1 - most of tommy's manipulation trauma started with wilbur in pogtopia and dream in s2 exile was like the even worse sequel (worse as in he very arguable hurt tommy more but like,,, still. pogtopia wilbur was really really fucked. like, i love him as a character but he did some really bad stuff and his family ultimately sorta-forgiving him for that is definitely not a decision i would have been able to make for one of my loved ones.

i need to stop going on these tangents. im too scared to get flooded with angry replies on tumblr lmao but somehow i find it easier to read ao3 comments saying the same thing, probably because im a lot more familiar with the site

any bottom line is that yes c!dream very bad and people should not hurty children, and yes he was bad in s1 too but in a mostly different way and thats reflected in this fic, which like the tags say just completely threw everything post-s1 out the window. the writing differences between wilbur and the s2 authors are very clear.

also, if you havent already, id suggest checking out "Between the Pieces", the other fic in this series, which goes a bit more into Tommy and Dream's background

edit: also i never intended dream being tommy's father to be much of a plot twist? the other fic confirmed it 3 months ago and its not like i was subtle here but if it came as a surprise then horray?? its intended to be read more as a small "oooh wait this might be the case" realization and the possibility just lingers there like a nagging ant until this chapter. its been dragging on for 40 chapters so like,,, eh?



# there's a room where the light won't find you

## Chapter Notes

this chapter has continuous dialogue that spans multiple paragraphs. if that is the case, there will be a quotation at the very beginning and the very end. yes i know what the actual proper way to do this is. more will be clarified in the end notes.

also, the SMP (or Dream Kingdom) refers to the country itself, while Essempy is the SMP's capital city.

that's all, dont like putting this sort of clarification in the beginning notes but it had to be done. hope you enjoy the chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“I’m not explaining with *you* here.” A pointed look towards Technoblade.

“I’ll tell him everything anyways,” Tommy points out.

There really is no winning here. Dream forces down the further complaints.

“Fine, whatever. I - I might as well start at the beginning.”

“A very good place to start, they say. Wise choice.”

“Techno, please shut up.”

“For once I actually agree with the green bitch.”

“Fine, fine. So...”

Dream closes his eyes, and soaks in a sharp intake.

“Keep in mind, I was told most of this background stuff from my mother - father - parent, I guess. Whatever they would be called.”

“How do you not know whether a parent is your mother or father?”

“That’s part of the thing that’ll be explained, Tommy! Could you shut up for like one minute. *Explain*, you demand, yet you interrupt me when I finally do-”

“Fine, fine! Fucking gods, Dream. Just go on.”

“Anyway, what I’m getting at is that I’ve only been alive for 60 years and the history of the Dreams is, like, way longer and I can’t personally vouch for some of the stuff I’ve been told, and neither can our ancestors 20 generations back, so - uh - keep that in mind.

Tommy, please let me at least get somewhere before you object again.

The Dreams as a species are from the End. The place used to have a lot more life than it does now. We're kind of a bad species, evolutionarily, though. Our kind is kind of a glitch. An error. Because normal species spread, and we just... don't.

Biology time first, I guess. We're - um. Fuck, this has got to be way worse than whatever talk normal parents give their children.

We reproduce asexually.

Don't give me that look. It's not my fault.

But anyway, we also - we can also reproduce once in our lifetimes. Only once. So you're here, and I physically can't ever have more children again. Which, given the amount of grief you've caused me, is something I'm thankful for every day.

So yes, this does mean I sort of... split off a part of myself and that part molded into a child... thing.

See, the thing with us is that we don't really follow a normal growth cycle either. Human growth cycle, anyway. It's hard to remember in the Overworld, but humans don't have the monopoly on growth patterns.

It's complicated, but... here, let me show you something. Technoblade, I swear, don't you dare say anything that'll make me regret this."

Dream reaches into the void inside of him - and *melts*.

Fingers flop down, and then the hands, with toes and feet and limbs and torso and and head and it's all moving and moved and fallen and spilled and dripping and white and crawling like spilled ink on cold stone and-

"What the fuck," Tommy whispers.

Dream moves to grin at him, and then remembers he can't.

It's been a while since he's let himself just... completely collapse.

The white, puddly mass he is, vaguely warbling around the clothes he once wore so fittedly, coalesces parts into a shape capable of making recognizable sound.

"This is basically what our true forms look like," Dream says. It feels strange, moving and talking and *being* like this.

This state of being which should be so natural to them. Which should be their state of being.

He's been playing at something resembling human for too long. And he knows he can not - will not - stop.

"A white blob," Tommy says, like the word is a sour fruit in his mouth. "Your natural form is a - is a white blob that looks like a slime absorbed too much milk."

"*Our* natural form," Dream corrects. "This is what we look like when we're first formed, and when we don't place any intent behind our appearances." As he speaks, he stiffens portions of the structure. Reshapes the void of his mind into something solid, something warm.

White seeps into gloves, condenses into pale flesh. Into leggings, shoes. A neck twists the head back out.

Within half a minute, he's back into his human-resembling masquerade.

Dream blinks, vision back, to find Technoblade and Tommy both staring with mouths agape.

"It's been a few minutes. I don't think you should still be looking like that," he says. Do they have trouble processing... this? George had freaked out for a good 30 minutes the first time.

That had been a fun day.

"No, it's-" Tommy snaps shut, and frowns.

"I've never felt so betrayed," Technoblade says, eyes wide behind his skull.

"About what?" Dream asks. "All the betrayal happened 2 years ago."

Though to be fair, he might have gotten so used to betrayal he's started unintentionally doing it, which would be an entire other problem to address sometime later.

"Your mask," Tommy blurts out.

Dream tries to blink, only to remember he hadn't molded that function back in yet. So he does.

"What about it?" he asks. There's no way he got the dots and smiley in the wrong position. He's practiced it too much.

"It's not real," Technoblade says, almost sounding... awed.

"What-"

Oh.

*Oh.*

"It's not *that* weird, is it?" Dream asks. "Why would I bother with a human face and mask when I can change a part of myself to look like a mask?"

"But your mask is a lie!" Tommy cries, looking genuinely disappointed. "It's - it's *part* of your face? You just - mold your slimy self into it? What the fuck?"

"It's not like anyone else can tell the difference. Might as well make use of the only good ability we have." Dream shrugs. "We can mold our bodies to look like and mimic the function of anything. I could turn into a cat right now."

He probably will once they return to Essemphy. A long nap around George's shoulders is long overdue, especially given the shit he's had to deal with so far on this trip.

"But then - but I-"

Dream realizes what Tommy's asking before he stumbles into the words for it, thankfully.

"Instincts drive you to copy other living things when you're younger, as far as I know," Dream says. "But both me and you only had our respective parents to copy when we were very young and first

grasping this ability, so it's not like I know the specifics. It's probably slightly different for every individual Dream, anyway.

We do have levels of maturity and comprehension ability we age into. I think it's - it's like slightly faster than a human's? But more towards the beginning. Like developmentally the first 10 years of a Dream's mind moves quite a bit faster than a 10 year old human's, but afterwards it slows down? To something a bit slower than a human mind?

Humans are a bad comparison. Not that there's a good one. We're from the End and everything evolved differently there.

Anyway, the End. No fucking clue where the original Dream came from, but at some point there were more than just 2 in the world. Since, you know, we can't die of old age. Or diseases.

And, at some point, one of the Dreams found a way into the Overworld. They - whatever pronoun it is, since we don't exactly have biological - uh - distinctions - are who we're descended from.

I'm sure you're wondering about the 'killing their parent' thing Dreams always do. This is - it's a lot more complicated than that. Obviously."

"Obviously," Tommy finally says. "I mean, I would like to stab you a lot, *obviously*, but I know that's kind of a bad fucking idea, *obviously*, given how *I'm* not in the business of causing societal upheaval. Obviously."

Dream rolls his eyes - or, the two black dots of his "mask." He quells a flare of satisfaction at seeing Tommy shudder a little.

"That's fucking creepy."

"That's the point." Dream reaches up to tap the mask - or mask-like part of his body, anyway. It rings hollow, solid, exactly as he wills it to be. "Anyway - what I was saying is that as a... species, I guess, though there's no more Dreams left in the End that me or my past 10 predecessors could find - we're very territorial. Not necessarily about territory, but just about... something. It goes back to attachments."

Tommy stares. Dream blinks, again, and continues.

"You know how ender dragons have territories, right? They hatch, and as soon as they're old enough, they leave. The island they choose becomes their home for the rest of their lives and they're - I think it's been described as being in physical pain if they have to leave that island.

Anyway, it's an intense biological drive that keeps them anchored in a specific place. That's - that's sort of what the Dreams have too. The End is really big on this kind of stuff, I guess."

Tommy looks at him skeptically. So does Technoblade - skeptical as he can look behind that skull mask, anyways.

"I'm not done," Dream grouses. "What I'm getting at is that the first Dream to enter the Overworld - or maybe their child, or child's child - I don't think any of the past few Dreams were ever sure and I'm certainly not - declared the area around Essempy as their territory. And it's been every subsequent Dream's territory ever since.

A Dream's territory claim isn't the same as an ender dragon's, which makes sense given how we're - you know - not the same species. We can leave the territory for a while without feeling any mental or

physical effects. We just - we develop an extremely strong attachment to whatever the territory is. We tend to refuse to ever let it go.

I say *tend to*, because Tommy has, which I was - I wasn't expecting."

"I've never felt any attachment to Essempy whatsoever," Tommy scowls. "You can keep your fucking lake city land place."

"I don't mean Essempy," Dream responds. He sighs, low. "Dreams start developing a territorial attachment usually just before reaching full maturity - which would have been you about a year or 2 ago, Tommy. It depends on what *territory* is available."

"Me and the L'Manberg ship sank 2 years ago, Dream."

"It's not L'Manberg."

Technoblade shifts, slightly. "You said *territory*. It's not always a place - or, a piece of land, is it?"

Dream's smile widens, despite how, in this moment, he feels as far from happy as possible. Instead the cold void gnaws at him further, but he resolutely shoves that aside.

"It's the discs," Tommy says suddenly. "I was - the attachment you describe. It was the discs."

"Of course it was," Dream says. "Let's be honest, any normal human has serious problems if they were as attached to the discs as you were. It's why I agreed to the bow duel trade - I wanted you back in the Essempy with me more than I wanted to keep L'Manberg, which was so far from the Essempy I don't have anywhere near as strong an attachment for it."

"And you thought I would come back for the discs?"

"I knew you would do *something* drastic to try and get them back. It's only in our nature. I could have leveraged to get *you* back one day." Dream frowns. "Wilbur ruined all that."

"Well, yeah. He did start the whole L'Manberg thing-"

"No, I mean - he got in the way of your attachment."

Tommy's eyes narrow.

Dream forces down another sigh. Here comes the part no one wants to hear.

"There's a reason I hated Wilbur so much. And that it showed when you two were in Pogtopia.

First of all, he - he replaced me, I suppose. I was supposed to be your father, your family, and I lost you through no fault of my own. Next time I saw you, every aspect of your life seemed to revolve around him. *He* became your new family, and I had no idea how, and I still don't, but I was fucking furious.

Especially since, given that the first thing he did in my territory was take away a chunk and declare independence, I suspected he somehow took you away to purposefully spite me.

I know, looking in hindsight here, that's extremely unlikely. That's not the point and you know it.

The other reason is that he prevented you from chasing after the discs. Not really physically, though I suppose exile makes it more difficult. But in the absence of the discs, *he* became your new attachment. You would have done anything for him. Just as the Kingdom - which, you call the SMP - includes many places, at one point your attachment was multiple things.

The discs, and Wilbur.”

Technoblade and Tommy share a glance, at that. Dream wonders - has Tommy somehow attached himself to Technoblade now? It's not a bad idea - especially if Technoblade is reciprocal to that attachment, even if just on a normal level.

Tommy could do far worse for an ally, for sure, though would be beneficial if they're something more. He's already gone through multiple other attachments. Dream's not sure what happens when one of their kind gains and loses *too* many, but he's sure it's nothing good.

“It's easier, this way,” he continues. “In the absence of the discs, you latched onto Wilbur harder. The discs were still a priority in your mind, but not so much that you would abandon L'Manberg or Pogtopia.”

*Not so much that it prevented you from leaving altogether.*

“Anyway, eventually that attachment of yours faded. I know, because after the 16th you didn't come after them again. Here lies the mystery I've been pondering.”

Tommy tenses, slightly. His eyes are still narrowed, shoulders hunched. The dog at his side bristles her spine ever so slightly. Technoblade shifts forward.

They're... upset. Dream's not sure why. This conversation is going splendidly for them.

“Since the discs are gone, and Wilbur's dead, what filled their place?” Dream glances at Technoblade. Unlikely choice, but... maybe? Attachments take time to develop, deepen. He's not sure the brief few months in Pogtopia could have strengthened it enough for Tommy to give up the discs he's held for years.

“That's none of your business,” Tommy mutters.

“Yeah, I figured.” Prime forbid *Tommy* explains anything to him.

“But - but we're-”

“Tommy,” Technoblade says softly.

“Oh shut, you.” But it sounds immeasurably fond. Tommy takes a deep breath. “So we - we just have a natural instinct to form stupid attachments to things? Or places? Or people? That's it? That's how we work?”

“Among other things.” Dream shrugs. Tommy's getting at something here, he thinks, but what? Fuck if he knows.

“Tommy, nothing's-”

“So is that why I lov-loved Wilbur so much?” Tommy's hand curls around a crystal, nearly shattering it. The dog at his side raises her head and whines, slightly.

“It’s why we generally prefer landmass, and try not to get attached to things that can die,” Dream says tiredly. “It’s rather - ah - painful. When they do.”

His condolences, he supposes. If Tommy is never going back to the Kingdom, Dream would rather he have *someone* who loves him and who Tommy loves in turn to keep him company, even if the idea of Wilbur having been Tommy’s brother still disgusts him.

It’s not like he himself can be that person. For a multitude of reasons.

George’s laughter echoes in his mind, slightly. With an internal wince, he tries to brush those memories aside for now.

“But - but *that’s* why I cared for him?” Tommy hisses, a little louder. Technoblade actually flinches. “Because I’m just - I’m driven by some stupid biological need to form attachments with whatever I first see?”

Dream blinks. He still doesn’t get why Tommy’s so upset, but he supposes he could explain it a bit further.

“It’s not with whatever we first see around that time of maturity. That would be annoying. We still *choose* who or what we form attachments with. We have to know them closely, deeply, and value them for their traits and our connection before any proper Dream-biology related attachment even begins forming.

Otherwise, how would our biology ensure we’re attached to something that would make us... I don’t know. Happy? More successful? It’s a bit fuzzy. That’s how I’ve been explained it, anyway. And what I’ve observed myself.

I don’t know why you’re pouting about this so much. It’s not really that different from the human desire to seek out social connections or love. Just... *more*, I guess, and with some other rules. Which makes sense. Different dimension, different evolution, remember?

Relax. Nothing about your memory of Wilbur has been tainted - or tainted more, I guess. You’re the one who knew the guy for years, I thought you would know this.

Wilbur’s dead now, anyway. What does it matter?”

“Yeah. yeah,” Tommy says distantly. His expression looks slightly less as if a porcupine had fallen in his birthday cake, so Dream supposes that’s... good?

Does he want Tommy to be happy? To be comfortable, to feel good about life?

He supposes it’s better than the alternative. Tommy is far, far too removed from the Kingdom to return anyway. It doesn’t really matter how he’s doing, as long as he’s not spilling secrets everywhere. If that’s the case, then shouldn’t Dream want him to be happy?

He does. He does want that. He’s still not quite sure about it, but he thinks he does.

“You *still* haven’t explained the whole ‘kill your parent’ thing,” Technoblade says, clearing his throat.

Dream scowls at him, a bit, but continues.

“Well - the past 20 or so Dreams have all made their major attachment - territory - Kingdom lands. It’s strongest around Essempy, but as history has happened the territory has expanded and shrunk.

The Dream Kingdom attachment isn't anything specific - like, there's nothing special about the land. It's just that it's where all Dreams have grown up, besides you. And as far as I can tell, a large part of what a Dream attaches to depends on where they grew up.

It's like - country patriotism taken to the next level, with possessiveness thrown in. If you had been raised in one place your entire life, you would probably have claimed it as territory. I'm guessing that didn't happen.

I'm guessing, actually, that Wilbur was the largest positive constant in your younger years, and that's how you latched onto him so hard you formed a proper attachment.

The thing about a Dream's attachments is that we really, really don't like sharing. Like all instincts, this can be overcome, because we're not - you know. Savage animals. But we all know murder is usually the easier solution.

I mentioned that we can only have one offspring. That's just how it is. Don't ask me why. I don't know much beyond that it's true. This doesn't mean we can't have more than just 2 Dreams in the world, but it does sometimes make it hard for more than 2 to exist somewhere together.

Here's the thing - most Dreams end up taking over the territory of their parent - I say most because you exist, Tommy. Congratulations. This usually involves murder, but not always?

It's said every Dream kills their parent to take their place eventually. That's not true. I know the first few did, and that's now the myth started - no love lost between them, I guess. And a lot afterwards, because they wanted to take over the territory, and by then it was expected. I've heard a few Dreams even welcomed it - something about the politics getting too tiring and them just wanting rest. And maybe something about sacrificing themselves for their children or something.

Don't look at me like that. I'm definitely fighting back if you try anything. And you know I would crush you like a bug.

It's just - since we're all raised on the Kingdom, and eventually find attachment to it - attachment some of the previous Dreams have cultivated in their children with that specific intent, by the way, so they could be replaced one day - it's hard not to come into conflict about it eventually.

There's - there's a lot of ways new Dreams have come into power. A lot of them killed their parent for one reason or another, yeah - most of the parents didn't bother fighting back, actually. I know a few that actually willingly killed themselves.

Yeah, I can't understand it either. We don't have that strong of an inherent will to live, or something something, yadda yadda- I guess it's one of those differences that varies by each Dream and we're just overall more open to letting our offspring kill us? That sounds weirder when I have to explain it.

I don't even know how far any of this goes. It's not like I've been doing experiments about this in my courtyard.

Again, Tommy, it varies with each Dream. If you attack me I make no promises about not punching you so hard your skull cracks open.

Technoblade, stop giving me that look. He would have started it.

Anyway, where was I? Oh, right - that. Uh... here's the other thing.

We're not actually the only 2 Dreams in the world.



There's... um. I think like 3 more? That's what my parent - uh, well, she always wore a female form, so I guess I should call her my mother - told me. That's what they've kept track of, anyway. Who knows, at this point.

Basically, there have been Dreams who have just up and left the Kingdom after having and raising their children to replace them. They... they manage to remove the Kingdom as an attachment and form it to something else. They usually formed that other attachment to something else in their younger years, actually, which makes the transition a lot easier when they're older.

Anyway, they just... leave. And the new Dream takes over. And... people just assume the old one was killed. Something like that.

Before you ask, I don't know where any of them are. I just know they exist because that's what my mother told me, because that's what her mother told her, and so on. We keep track of these things and pass them down to the... next generation. Which in my case would be you."

Tommy taps again a crystal. "What did you do to your mother?"

Dream stiffens. Tommy clearly took notice.

"What, was your murder particularly gruesome? Was she-"

"I didn't do anything!" Dream couldn't hold from snapping. He took a sharp breath, and drew back a moment later. Then, he swallows. "I - nothing except not show up soon enough, I guess."

Tommy frowns, and probably so does Technoblade. "What?"

"I didn't kill her," Dream mutters, the words like dragon-breath fire on his tongue. "And she didn't kill herself either. She - she was assassinated."

Tommy blinks, slow. "Assassinated."

"We can still die," Dream snorts. "I'm sure you've learned that by now. Sword to the stomach? Maybe we'll bleed out slower, but we'll still bleed out if no medical attention is given. A chopped head is still a chopped head."

The day his mother died was the fourth worst day of Dream life. It was *the* worst until Tommy came along -

Until Tommy was kidnapped. Until the bow duel. Until Dream realized he had left, yet again.

He wished...

He hadn't planned to kill his mother. Or anyone. He had sought and adored other things - exploring the worlds, learning all the weapons, mastering parkour movement - and they were all things that required continual refinement. That would slip in skill if he didn't commit to continual practice. He had been about ready to form attachments to Primedamned *skillsets*.

Dream had never wanted to take over the Kingdom, at least not badly enough that he would kill his mother for it. By most standards she hadn't been a great parent, but she wasn't awful either. She cared in her own way. And there wasn't any reason for her to be wary of him, when he was so clearly more interested in other things and will be for the foreseeable future, which made their relationship a lot easier.

And then, she was dead.

“Assassin snuck in, tried to kill the fabled Dream, succeeded - you know the drill,” Dream says. “I killed her, of course - the assassin, that is. Couldn’t let her live to tell the tale. She had snuck in with a dagger and managed to nail my mother in the head while they were alone in a hallway. And just like that, the Kingdom was mine.”

Because the Kingdom is his territory, his attachment, and that had been true back then as well, and he couldn’t have left it, just as it had been the case with every Dream before him.

He hesitates, and adds, “it’s happened a few times. A Dream dying because of an assassination or accident. I was told about one Dream who died because they accidentally fell off a ladder and cracked their head on stone too hard - apparently that one had been a pain to cover up for the successor.

And that... is about it. Patricide, matricide, suicide, murder, accidents, faking your own death... everyone thinks we’re all destined to kill our parents, and we’ve been fine to keep the rumor mill going that way because it’s a lot easier, but it’s way more complicated than that.

There’s only been 22 of us - maybe only 19 have actually *led* the Kingdom. That’s not actually a lot. Time works differently for our biology than it does for humans. One way or another, control of the Kingdom has kept passing down and down, but that’s why you see such varied gaps between succession times too. The longest reigning Dream lasted nearly 400 years, and the shortest was like 8 months because at that point there were like 4 Dreams in the castle, since we can reproduce as soon as maturity hits and not when we gain control of the Kingdom.

Tommy, I wanted you back in the Kingdom because you’re my son, and you’re a Dream, and I had this notion that I might as well raise a successor for the Kingdom when someone inevitably succeeds in putting an arrow in my head. The biggest reason is also just secrecy - you don’t know much of anything about our history, and it’s not your fault. It’s stuff I should have taught you earlier, but you weren’t there to be taught.

That’s why I’m saying all this now.

At this point it’s pretty obvious you’re not going to rule the Kingdom one day, and quite frankly, good riddance. I hate the job and the Kingdom is literally my home.

Which means the Dream line ends with us - at least, in terms of those who rule the Kingdom. One way or another. Since I’m guessing you’re not handing any hypothetical future children over either.

And honestly, we saw this coming for a long time. The fact that we’ve lasted this long as the Kingdom rulers is a combination of decent decision-making and luck. That luck was bound to run out eventually, and it did with you.

Remember what I said about us not really functioning as a proper species? This is why. It’s not like anyone can collect a population census, or write a paper on how we influence our habitat. We’re terrible at self-propagation - it was a lot easier in the End where we could just spread out, but we can’t exactly do that in the Overworld. Some very early Dreams tried - the human rulers of whatever place always managed to hunt them down and kill them, which is a lot easier when the Dream sticks around in one patch of territory and proclaims they’re the boss of it.

So, we-”

“How did I - leave?” Tommy asks.

Dream looks up. "What?"

"I was... created, presumably, in Essempy. In your castle place. So how did I get..."

Dream frowns. "What's your earliest memory?"

Tommy squints. "Your stupid shade of green, actually. And a lot of soft stuff. But the earliest concrete thing I can remember is just being on the streets, stealing stuff to eat."

"Oh. Well - you were kidnapped."

Dream had tried. He had tried so hard, the memory of his mother's death still lingering like a mockery, and he had sworn he would protect his own child and ensure he wouldn't be befallen with the same fate, and that had involved locking him away in the maze below the castle, but he had tried and...

Tommy had still been taken, in the end.

At least he's alive now, and happy. At least they didn't outright kill him.

"Well, guess I escaped," Tommy shrugs. "Wilbur - I met Wilbur at some point and he took care of me."

"That explains that, I suppose," Technoblade says. He stalks over to a boulder, red cloak a darker swish of shadow in the dim crystal-lights, and seats himself down. "What *I* want explained is how your... *morphing* ability works." He leans forward, looking almost eager.

Tommy chuckles like this is an old argument.

Dream shrugs. "Our true forms are shapeless white blobs. We can shape that form into anything we want as long as we have the mass for it. When we're younger, we just mimic what we see around us - Tommy only really saw me before he got kidnapped, so his form mimicked mine, and I taught him to maintain that form. My face looks like this right now, but I can also-"

Dream draws upon the memory in his mind, of freckles and sun-tanned skin, and the pearly mask-face slides away to reveal something far closer to human. It's the form he's chosen and stuck with for the past 4 decades, behind meetings and public appearances.

"Hah! Tommy, I *told* you your hair looks identical to his."

"Shut up, Techno."

Dream rolls his eyes. "This does mean we don't have biological sexes. The gender thing is something borrowed from humans - Dreams as children usually start out copying their parent's looks, though since they don't have as much mass yet they end up looking much younger. We do encourage them to put in more child-like features - that's what my mother did, anyway, so I did that with Tommy.

After they mature a bit more, some Dreams decide they want to alter their appearance or present as a different gender or something. We usually settle into something concrete around adulthood, though.

We - our appearance - reflects what we expect to look like, and what we want to look like. I'm guessing since you always expected to look like you're growing like a normal boy, you always did. It's not an exact science. Don't ask me for details about how it works.

The ability takes a while to get used to. I don't know if you..."

"I'll figure it out later," Tommy shrugs.

"Sure. Whatever floats your boat." Dream pauses. "Any other questions?"

Technoblade and Tommy seem to be holding their own conversation through the glances and furtive hand gestures. It lends credence to the idea that Technoblade is some attachment of Tommy's.

Tommy could do with a lot worse. That's good, Dream supposes.

"Not now," Tommy eventually says, to Technoblade's unhappy sigh in the background. "I've had enough of looking at your stupid face today. So I'm going to go and take a break from this torture."

"Suit yourself," Dream says. He shrugs, and wonders why the cold feeling in his chest hasn't gone away.

He should find George again. He's always felt warmer around George, even when they're having some sort of disagreement. He shouldn't be dwelling on - on *this*.

He's explained what he needs to Tommy. He's done at least some part of his duty. That's enough, isn't it?

"Lead the way out, then," Dream says finally.

The tunnels here are long and dark and twisting and maze-like, after all. Tommy is familiar with them, or familiar enough. Dream is not.

Tommy and Technoblade exchange one last glance that sends a sear of old envy down Dream's chest, and he forces himself to remain silent as he files after Tommy and Technoblade trails from behind.

He is struck, suddenly, with the concrete realization that the child he has spent 14 years searching for is dead, and has been for a long time. There is no heir, no connection - not like this.

It's not even what he needs, is it? Not really. He's been chasing after a dead end for a decade and a half through no fault of either of them.

Everything about Tommy, all finally over.

And now, all he wants to do is return to his home, the city of Essempy, with its beautiful lake view and tall grasslands and colorful, spiraling towers with George at his side.

## Chapter End Notes

uhhh a Lot of dreams exposition dump (well i guess not exposition but basically same concept). hopefully it felt earned instead of a chore? if there's any other way i could have conveyed that information better then pls let me know

i know starting multi-paragraph dialogue technically should start with a " at the beginning of every paragraph, like for example-

"Hello.

"My name is Dream and I am a green bitch.

"Let me talk about how much of a bitch I am.

"I am a bitch. I support this way of formatting multi-paragraph dialogue.

"I have to go read more DNF fanfic now. Bye."

i think this is dumb. it looks terrible. and there is no reason for it to exist. "oh, it's to let the audience know it's the same person speaking." but just having one quotation at the very beginning and very end does the same thing?? and barely anyone knows this is the "proper" way to do it?? (like i can find multiple sources backing this up as a grammar rule and i know it is, but who in the general readership cares?) to the point where on a fanfiction site people would sooner write it off as a typo than realize it's an actual thing?

normally i adhere to grammar rules pretty strictly but this is the exception. if enough people stop doing it and just put quotations at the beginning and end of the entire dialogue like how a normal person thinks it would work it will eventually become the correct way to do it because language changes like that. therefore, i am not following that stupid grammar rule and neither should you.

also, i will say, dream is hard denying he once really loved tommy (and still does, actually, in his own kinda twisted and unhealthy way). like if you read between the pieces he was trying really hard to strike a balance between giving tommy as much time and happiness as possible while keeping him as safe as he could, and it wasn't prefect at all but he really did try. and itty bitty child tommy was genuinely happy.

but yeah not that he's faced with the fact that tommy still kinda hates him and is never coming back he's trying to damage control his own emotions by convincing himself "my son? tommy? nah i only marginally cared about him he's like okay i guess, just another pawn in my grand scheme haha"

there's also like,, a bit more dream lore left. they're not completely done talking yet. but this is the main bulk of it.

i hope this didn't feel, like, too contrived. even though it is kinda all contrivedish? idk? but its all about presentation now, so let me know what you thought of it? the dream subplot is something that's been simmering for a long time and this chapter is where it all explodes lmao

also its implied but not said here - ender dragons reproduce asexually too. all ender dragons are "female" (though in an all female species that distinction doesn't really matter? it only matters because other species around it have male and female differences) and they lay eggs with dragonets inside that have identical genes as the mother barring genetic mutations. there is actually a real life species of lizard that are like this. scientists searched for a male of that species for fucking decades before realizing the entire species is female and reproduce asexually lmao

# dream high in the quiet of the night

## Chapter Notes

[discord](#) to get pings for updates/discuss stuff!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“That’s a lot,” Wilbur says finally.

“No shit,” Tommy retorts. He slumps further down the couch and takes another drink of his willow tea.

“It does explain things,” Phil says. “A... lot. Of things.”

“I think that’s partially why I wanted to come back to New L’Manberg so much, actually,” Tommy says with a wince. “Dream didn’t say this, and I don’t think he knows, but Tubbo was probably one of my attachments at some point too.”

“That idea is terrifying, but I guess I’m flattered?”

“Yeah, bitch. Be flattered.”

Ranboo rolls his eyes.

“I’m trying to - to cut that one, though,” Tommy adds a moment later, briefly look away. “It’s not healthy. Especially when you’re still doing this whole... country thing.”

“Yeah, I figured.” Tubbo gives him a small smile. “But normal friends? Great friends? Long-distance-letter-relationship friends?”

Tommy grins back. “That sounds good.”

He doesn’t need Dream, and he doesn’t want anything to do with any of New L’Manberg or The SMP or Dream’s conflicts, and he’s already accustomed himself to the idea of leaving it all behind.

It’ll be enough. It’s far more than enough. It has to be.

After all, nothing about what they’ve learned changes anything. Things had been going to plan and they will keep going to plan.

He has his family. Attachments and love and biology - the bottom line is all the same, in the end.

They love each other, and they’ll stay together.

~\*~

This - this changes things.

Some things. A few things. Little things, hopefully - maybe good things.

Wilbur sighs, and slams his face back into the pillow.

There's nothing wrong about Tommy being a Dream, or Dream's son - that part is kind of funny, actually, gives everything a great bit of irony - but it's more so about what Tommy can do going forward.

There's the obvious. If Tommy can shapeshift, can do - whatever it is Dreams can do - what could they accomplish with it? Many things, obviously. Nothing too noticeable to the wider world. It could be something to test, if Tommy's comfortable with it.

Dream, though - Dream is the one who knows the details about they can do. What Dream had relayed to Tommy implies he should have taught Tommy the intricacies of the skill in Tommy's younger years, something which Tommy evidently didn't experience on account of... not being there.

There is nothing to be done about lost pasts that he wouldn't wish for the truth of anyways, so there turns to the other option - Dream, at one point, should probably meet with Tommy at least one more time to explain the shapeshifting further. Not just *what* they can do, but also *how* they can do it.

As much as the idea of Tommy interacting Dream any more revolts him, there are simply things to be learned that can not take place over a single conversation.

*"Of course you're the villain, Wilbur. What else would you be?"*

There's nothing, nothing - he's over that. As much as he can be, at this point. He can't - Dream being here and being related to Tommy doesn't change any of that.

Through the pillow, Wilbur inhales slowly.

1, 2.

In, out.

*Dream is here, but he can't hurt me. He doesn't have any reason to hurt me. I know why he did what he did. It was a very fucked up thing for him to do and he was wrong to do it, just like I was wrong to hurt Tommy.*

*I am fine. I am safe. My family is fine.*

*I am fine. I am fine. Everything is fine. There is no danger. I am fine. My family is safe. I am fine.*

Wilbur repeats the mantra for a few more minutes, before his breathing evens out.

He can understand now, on several levels, Dream's desire to take Tommy back. A being like a Dream should not be aimlessly wandering around the world with no idea of their own nature or abilities. It's a recipe for disaster, and danger, and if Phil hadn't found Tommy and taken him in all those years ago-

Wilbur soothes down the shudder inside of him.

The other problem is this - they have a motivation for why Dream wishes Tommy back now, but do they know that he really, truly, has dropped it?

Tommy said Dream has decided he wouldn't chase after Tommy further. From the looks of things, Dream thinks Wilbur is dead, and isn't even aware of Phil's existence - at least, in the context that

he's Tommy's father. New father. Adopted father.

They always knew they were adopted by Phil, though. That part doesn't change at all.

Dear fucking gods, Wilbur hopes he never encounters his biological parents.

Well. There's a few actions to be done regarding The Reveal, and all. That he can do, anyways.

Wilbur rolls out the hotel bed with a thump, wincing as his foot knocks into a chair's hard edge. Then he hauls himself up, shakes the morning stiffness out of his muscles, and stumbles towards the bed across the ridiculously spacious room where Techno is still slumbering.

~\*~

"Why are you here?" Dream asks. He sounds tired, again.

"Why are you sleeping on the roof of the White House like a homeless person?" Techno asks in turn. When he had set out to find Dream at the behest of a sleepily mumbling Wilbur, this is not where he had expected to find him.

"There's privacy." Dream rolls around, and shifts the blanket back over his shoulders. "Shut up and let me go back to sleep."

He pauses, and adds, "and I'm not homeless."

"Sure, sure, Dream. Anyway, I have a few questions first."

"*I'm not* - ugh, whatever." Dream mumbles something indistinguishable. "Questions, questions - oh boy, if only there was a time yesterday where I offered to answer any questions you might have."

He has a point, not that Techno would ever admit it.

"It's not just me. And the question - not really a question, actually. I need to know for sure you have absolutely no intentions of coming after Tommy again."

Dream makes an irritated noise and shifts the blanket to cover his entire head, mask-face and faux hair and all. "Why would I go after Tommy now? He clearly has you to follow," his voice muffles from the white covering.

"That's true." Techno lets himself preen a bit. "And we all know how a fight between us would turn out--"

"One fight. We had *one* fight and you won. Whatever. Can I go back to sleep now?"

"Well, are you sure you're not planning any kidnapping? Attempted murder, perhaps? Casual extortion? Nation-wide terrorism?"

"Not towards you or Tommy or - well, I promise not to bomb the entirety of New L'Manberg, okay?" Dream sighs. "What would I even do to him? As long as he's not blabbering all our secrets to the world, which wouldn't end very well for him either, it's - it's just whatever."

A sharp feeling drags down Techno's throat. "So you admit everything you did to Wilbur was completely unnecessary and unwarranted too?"



“I - is *that* what this is about?” Dream frowns. “Did Tommy put you up to this? Yeah, it was - I shouldn’t have done that, it hurt both him and Tommy a lot and I can’t say I really care much about what happens to Wilbur, so - it was unnecessary, yes. Happy now?”

“You...”

“I could apologize, but that wouldn’t mean much of anything and you know it.”

He does. And Wilbur doesn’t need an apology, not one like this.

“Fine,” Techno mutters. He retreats back a little.

Dream has no way of knowing where they’ll leave for anyways. This will have to be the best they can do, for now.

With a darting leap, only one of New L’Manberg’s most hated war criminals are left nestled and hidden on the White House’s rooftop. Techno hopes Dream gets caught, even if there’s little change of anyone spotting a white blanket hiding a white shape on the white roof.

~\*~

“Hey. Green bitch.”

“I really should have expected this,” Dream groans. “First Techno, and then Tubbo, and now you. What, is the ghost of Wilbur going to float down from Server to hound me about this as well?”

Tommy rolls his eyes, unimpressed. “Explain to me how the reproduction thing works.”

*Reproduction.* The word feels sticky on his tongue. Who would want to undergo such a thing, anyways? Why would every Dream ever decide it’s a good idea?

Actually, that’s a good point. There had to have been Dreams in history who *didn’t* want children.

Fuck, please tell him it’s not involuntary.

Dream eyes him, looking almost suspicious. That’s fucking ridiculous, because Tommy is the only one with a right to be suspicious about any of this.

“You think about it very hard,” Dream says finally. “And sometimes a part splits off. Or you chop off a part of your body yourself - preferably a non-fatal part. A limb, or something. Once the wound heals we can just shift more of our mass to form a new limb, but under the right conditions a new Dream will grow from the detached limb.”

“You speaking from experience, or...”

“Yes, I’m speaking from experience.”

“Horrifying,” Tommy says, wrinkling his nose. It helps that he’s in Dream’s hotel room, after Tubbo gave him official documents allowing him past the guards. There’s nothing here but the smell of Dream and, weirdly enough, mushrooms.

“Even coming from a different dimension doesn’t allow escape from the pain of childbirth,” Dream deadpans.

Tommy's eyes widen. Fuck, he hadn't even thought about the pain of just... cutting off a limb. That shit's got to hurt.

"Extra horrifying," he comments. "I hope that never happens to me."

"I hope so too," Dream says, glancing away. "I have no clue why I thought having you would be a good idea."

"Me neither," Tommy says. "Why do Dreams even bother having children?"

Dream shrugs. "Most of us don't want to rule the SMP forever. Most of us also - or maybe just me and I'm an even bigger failure than I realize - just felt like it. Wanted it. It's a bit of a biological drive, I think. Some of us also apparently had children by accident. Like I said - it's luck that's kept our line going for so long."

"So should I be worried about broken fingernails now?"

"No?" The two black dots of Dream's mask eyes bob up and down, which - okay, that will never not be fucking creepy. "I think the closest minimum mass we've found is 500 grams. Or so. It's depends a bit on temperature and humidity level-

Oh, right. Those SMP weirdos use that new *metric* system.

New L'Manbergians do too. Tommy could never quite get used to it.

"So if my arm gets accidentally cut off, how much should I be worried about a mini-Tommy forming?" Tommy asks.

Dream stares. "Not... that much? You could burn it to make sure. Or, if you're that worried, you could always just reattach the arm back to your shoulder."

"Reattach - *what the fuck?*"

~\*~

Tommy leaves Dream's room with many questions answered, many more questions unanswered that he does *not* want answers to, and an address in Essempey he could send letters for further contact.

Somehow, he's become new pen pal buddies with *Dream*. Unbelievable.

~\*~

He steps outside the (extremely guarded, holy fuck these people do not like the green bitch) hotels doors to come face to face with someone vaguely familiar and smelling of mushrooms.

"George?" Tommy asks, blinking. "George Notfound?"

George blinks back. "Tommy?"

Tommy drags him back into the hotel lobby, and into a secluded corner.

"Did you know I'm your boyfriend's son?" is the first thing he whispers.

"He told me everything that went down yesterday, yeah," George whispers back, sounding vaguely irritated. "Can't believe the idiot just followed you willy-nilly like that."

“Well, he came out fine. Which is more than he deserves.” Tommy pauses, and adds, “also, I thought you would have denied being his boyfriend by now.”

“People call us boyfriends or husbands all the time. I’m used to it?”

Wait. *Wait.*

“Did you act as my mother when I was with Dream?” Tommy frowns, suddenly alarmed.

George snorts. “Dream is the mother, remember? But no. The plan was-” he frowns too, mirroring Tommy. “Dream was the only one who interacted with you, because he wanted you to lock your appearance onto him first. The plan was that when you got a bit older he would introduce us, but obviously that never happened.”

“Oh good, good.” Tommy had *not* needed that imagery in his head.

“He does mean well, you know,” George adds, voice somehow dropping even lower. “I know he probably left you a way to contact him, and I also know you probably don’t want to. I just - I want you to know that he really, really adored you. He wouldn’t shut up about you in those years he was raising you. It was kind of insufferably, actually - every spare moment seemed to revolve around you, or talking about you, or thinking about how to take care of you.”

“That’s kind of creepy.”

“Maybe, but you were also his son. I could tell he was utterly smitten. And I - I don’t think that love’s every really gone away.”

“That’s also kind of creepy, considering that - you know. He’s not my father anymore. And I don’t need his love.”

George shifts, looking distinctly uncomfortable.

“I know that too. But you can’t really blame him for feeling this way.” He pauses, and scratches his chin. “Just - keep that in mind about him, okay? If it means anything, I don’t think he has reason to do anything that’ll hurt you, and that was never his goal. I know a lot of what he did before were... really dick moves.”

Tommy glances back towards the door. He hopes his family isn’t wondering what’s taken him so long. “Uh - thanks? I guess. Was not expecting this from you of all people, but okay.”

George chuckles, something rueful in the tone.

“If there’s anything I’m an expert at, it’s Dream. This one, anyways.” He takes a step back towards the spiraling stairs leading up to the main hotel rooms. “Have a good day, Tommy.”

“Sure,” Tommy says, and turns for the exit. “Tell Dream I said bye, I guess. Think I forgot to do that the first time.”

to clarify - no, vos!tommy will never have children. as far as im concerned he never becomes a parent and is childless until the end of time, and that's the way he would live most happily. he has a fuckton of pets, but not children.

when i said we're throwing all the post-s1 lore out i meant all of it.

# we both remember, that day in the summer

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“This place is off limits to visitors. If you don’t leave now, I’ll call the guards.”

Wilbur turns to meet dark eyes, and a face paler than he remembers.

“A graveyard is off limits to visitors?” he asks, raising an eyebrow.

“You’re not from around here, are you?” Quackity frowns. “People kept vandalising J. Schlatt’s grave. Someone tried to eat his heart.”

“Bastard would have deserved it,” Wilbur scoffs. He leans against the tombstone, relaxes completely, and feel as though the entire slab of andesite is creaking angrily beneath this weight.

Quackity freezes. “You-”

“I have legal rights to be here,” Wilbur says. “Especially if *he* gets to be buried six feet under.” He taps the engraved name, *Jonathan Schlatt*, cut deep. Flakes of pink mar the edges, like someone had at one point tried to fill the name with dyed tar.

“You’re-” Quackity’s face twists, a bit, and suddenly turns thunderous. He throws his hands, too dramatic. “Oh, *of course*. Why does it have to be *me* of all people who first encounters Wilbur Soot’s ghost?”

Okay, wow. This is getting a bit old. Serious, why does *everyone* around here assume he’s a ghost?

Though, he’s certainly not correcting *Quackity* about this.

“Why’d you assume you’re the first one to see me?” Wilbur asks instead, genuinely cheerful. Oh, this is fucking hilarious. “Who would go blabbering around ‘*oh, I saw Wilbur Soot’s ghost today, and I promise I’m totally not going crazy and am still absolutely still qualified to continue lawmaking!*’ Seriously, who?”

Quackity blinks rapidly for a few long seconds. “So - Tubbo’s seen you too?”

Wilbur shrugs. “At least you know he’s not crazy.”

Near effortlessly (as a movement he learned from Techno), he pushes himself onto Schlatt’s gravestone, legs left dangling. He could kiss whoever designed this thing - rectangular shape, flat top? It’s the perfect bench to look down on Schlatt’s buried body from.

“What are you *doing* here?” Quackity splutters.

“I’m in a *graveyard*, ” Wilbur says. “What do you think I’m doing here?”

The truth was that he had simply wanted to see Schlatt’s grave, for... well. To simply see it. Acknowledge the end, or something - and looking back, Schlatt had indeed had the better claim to presidency anyways. He had made some decent changes.

He was also just, of course, a fucking idiotic dickhead who exiled him and Tommy and sent assassins after them. Wilbur had been spending a fair amount of time making fun of Schlatt's tombstone, and all the signs of vandalism that accompanies it.

Come on; New L'Manberg had deemed *Schlatt's grave* a place important enough to make a whole new island for among the waters. He might as well visit, if only just to rub in the fact that only one of them is still alive.

He had also picked a few orchids and chrysanthemums decorating the place, which are now pressed between notebook pages in a pocket of his cloak. More for Tommy's collection.

"You... but *you* don't have a grave," Quackity says.

"Yeah," Wilbur shrugs. "Because New L'Manberg didn't think I deserved one. Not even a small memorial - just nothing at all. As if I were utterly irrelevant."

Quackity flinches.

"What, did you think a grave is required for a ghost to come back? That's just dumb. Most cultures don't even bury their dead, you know," Wilbur continues almost conversationally. "I was just taking some quality time to mock Schlatt's grave. It looks really, really dumb."

"You - I - the *one* time I decide to come pay respects-" Quackity groans. "What do you want? Are you going to haunt me until I fulfil your revenge or something? Tubbo wouldn't cave?"

"You'd be pretty useless for any revenge I'd want," Wilbur says. Oh, this is great. Lying by omission is the best kind of challenge.

Only for idiots outside his family or friend circle, though. That's a very hard line he's drawn.

"We didn't have a body to bury," Quackity says weakly, probably protesting against some invisible perception. Wilbur shrugs.

"Of course there isn't," he says. "You know, I was just here minding my own business. You're the one who interrupted me. By telling me this place is off limits to visitors, of all things!"

He chuckles a little, and Quackity flinches again.

"Uh - I guess I'll just-" Quackity inches back. "I'll just leave you to it?"

A thought strikes Wilbur.

"Who was Schlatt to you?"

"Huh?"

"Who was Schlatt to you?" Wilbur asks, tilting his head. "I want to know."

Quackity draws back, slightly - and then, something flashes bright in his eyes, and his shoulders square.

"He was my friend and business partner. After the election, he was my president and boss, and also... friend." He frowns. "Then our relationship broke down a bit."

Quackity stares into the tombstone name, as though he's trying to burn a hole through it. "He was - he was a former friend who, in his last moments, I decided wasn't worth being friends with anymore. That satisfy you enough to go back to move onto the afterlife you should be in?"

It's completely different from Wilbur would say, and nothing too surprising all the while. He never really knew Quackity, of course.

But - Schlatt is a nightmare distant, and who they will both fight the memory of to keep it that way. It's refreshing, to hear the words from Quackity. A kind of validation, not for Wilbur himself, but for the way Schlatt's actions have dragged them through the mire.

Although...

"Are you sure you were just friends?" Wilbur asks, raising an eyebrow.

Quackity bristles. "That's none of your business and doesn't factor into anything."

"Fair, fair. It was just a question." Wilbur hums, a 5-note melody, and slides off Schlatt's tombstone. "Well, Quackity - nice talking to you. I have other places to be, so I will... probably see you never!"

Thankfully, Quackity isn't blocking the way to the front gates.

Wilbur crosses them, and turns out of sight to the left. Good thing he had rowed the canoe over to the back of the island - where the guard stationed there is still asleep.

It's a nice afternoon for a nap. He should return to the hotel room for such a thing as well.

~\*~

"Tubbo, Tommy, I have - I have something for you two," Phil says.

Tubbo looks up from the book of very specific numbers he had been showing Tommy.

There's an almost nervous rhythm to the way Phil crosses over to them in 3 strides, and places a compass in each of their laps. They're warm, probably from being gripped in Phil's hand for some length of time, and the width of an apple.

Tommy picks his up, and holds it up to the light with a squint. So does Tubbo.

Spread together like this, it's easy to see how the needles point directly to each other.

*Tubbo* is engraved on the side of the compass on Tommy's hand, and *Tommy* on Tubbo's.

"There's a tiny lodestone in each one," Phil says. "They're wired to point at the other compass."

"So they're trackers for each other?" Tommy asks. *Trackers for...*

Phil smiles wryly. "I figured you two might want something like this. I'll show you the blueprints, Tubbo, if you want something like it between you and Ranboo too. Sculpting a lodestone that tiny is difficult, but a skilled enchanter should be able to figure it out."

Well, that's-

"That's so fucking cool," Tubbo breathes, eyes suddening shining. "I didn't - I didn't think anyone could embed a lodestone this size."

“It was a lot of math,” Phil laughs. “Techno did most of it, actually. Do you two - ah...”

*Do you like it? Do you want it? Do you think we did the right thing?*

“Of course we love it,” Tommy says, his chest tight.

*Tubbo. Tubbo, Tubbo, Tubbo.* The engraving is simple, few flourishes and no intricate patterning like on some other kinds of letter engravings he’s seen, but it’s deep and smooth and clear.

They might not belong to each other anymore, but despite everything, they’re still friends.

They’re still friends.

Tommy would call that an achievement.

“Now to never let Dream find this,” Tubbo laughs.

“Please. He’d probably mail it back to you, the wimp.” Tommy runs a finger down the glass, clear as a summer stream. The needle of his compass is a dark green, he notes, the same shade as Tubbo’s favorite tie. Of soft moss and velvets.

“It’s enchanted with loyalty,” Phil adds. “If someone else touches it, it won’t work until you’ve touched it again, or if it’s not within a few feet of you.”

Tubbo squints. “You need my blood to bind a loyalty enchantment for me.”

“Ranboo wishes you a happy early birthday.”

“Ran - wait, *what?*”

Tommy chokes on his laughter.

~\*~

“Are those Sparklez Kingdom troops?” Tommy frowns at the embassy, where several soldiers are crowded around the patio table. “They weren’t there a few days ago.”

“A squadron just arrived,” Ranboo says. “Said they’ll make sure the SMP keeps their word on the treaty, or something. Tubbo has an agreement with the king about it.”

“Oh, yeah.” King Sparklez, or Jordan, or whatever his name is - Tommy vaguely recalls meeting him once or twice.

Decently nice guy. Which, from his experience looking at leaders, says absolutely nothing about how he would run a country. But this alliance seems to have worked out... alrightish. So far.

It’s also only been 2 years, which means absolutely nothing is guaranteed, but that’s not going to be Tommy’s problem and they’re all agreed to stop moping about it.

“Huh,” is what he says instead. “Those muffins they’re eating look good.”

~\*~

“Wilbur, your hood’s not up.”



“If Niki didn’t recognize me, I doubt anyone in the general populace can,” Wilbur says, briefly glancing into the water. .

“But-” Tommy frowns. “You do have a point, I guess.”

He takes another bite of his crab cake. Fuck, these things are good - he’ll definitely have to ask Phil to try and recreate some once they’re back.

“I could prove it,” Wilbur says. He leans over the back of their canoe and yells towards the people behind them, “Hey! Do I look like Wilbur Soot? I got the voice, don’t I?”

Phil tries and fails to muffle a high-pitched laugh. Several of the other canoe’s occupants snort, or roll their eyes.

“No!” One of them yells back.

Wilbur turns to grin at them.

Techno sighs. “One week, and you’re already abandoning caution to the wind.”

“Cheer up, Techno. What are they going to do, report a Wilbur Soot-lookalike to the guards?”

“He’s not good looking enough to be remembered as the Wilbur Soot they know,” Tommy agrees. He ducks Wilbur’s half-hearted attempt at swiping him.

“Let’s just get Tommy’s flower seeds and get back to the hotel,” Techno sighs. “We’ve spent so long exploring L’Manberg it’s dark again, and I’d rather not be sleep deprived for once tomorrow to begin the trip back. Ideally, we want to make good ground before the noon heat rolls.”

“Still can’t believe it’s summer in this place,” Tommy mutters.

~\*~

“You’re not taking a ship back?” Tubbo asks.

“We are, just from a port further south.” Tommy taps the map he’s holding. “We’ll probably pay for a carriage ride for a few hours to reach this birch forest - the same one I headed to last time, actually, where Phil was waiting - ‘cause I remember there had been some really unique flowers there and I want to collect samples.”

Tubbo rolls his eyes. “Of course, of course. I...”

He frowns, and takes a step closer.

“This is goodbye for now, yeah.” Tommy leans over, and wraps his arms tight around Tubbo’s shoulders. “We’ve already said a lot of goodbyes, though, so I’m not getting all sappy and shit. Stay alive, okay?”

Tubbo laughs weakly. “Yeah. I’ll try my best.”

Ranboo peeks his head from the doorway. His tie is backwards, hair disheveled. “Are you two having a goodbye hug? Do I get to join in?”

“Yes, ender boy. You can join in.”

Ranboo's arms are stupidly good for hugging two people at once. Tommy's jealous, until he realizes he could technically mold his body to do the same thing.

An attempt at such leaves him with floppy noodle arms until he manages to solidify them back to how they were before, with Tubbo and Ranboo laughing at him for a good 10 minutes until Phil comes along to pick him up from the White House's front lawn.

It's as nice a day as any to leave New L'Manberg. From the canoe, Tommy waves his farewell to Tubbo and Ranboo until they've long since glided out of sight.

## Chapter End Notes

shorter chapters pog! man, i cant wait for this to be over lmao. writing it has been great for me but you can only work on the same thing for so long.

also! my twitch has been inactive recently, but i confirm there will be a stream soon after this is finished, to,,, uh. celebrate this is finished?

i'll do a comment reading and replying marathon, answer any lingering questions people might have, and maybe outline a bit of the tubbo + ranboo short fic that'll also be part of this series! as well as whatever else - was thinking of doing a tierlist for all the vos chapters too. it'll probably begin on this Sunday 8 or 9 am EST, on the 29th

# will you weep, for this day is not glorious?

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The flowers are pretty. They don't find that original shelter Phil had built, where he had taken Wilbur to, where they had gathered and rested and ignored the icicles of stony silence between them. Maybe it's now broken down beyond recognizability, mulch and fodder for the forest.

But - the flowers are nice. Tommy acquires several, and obtains a few more seed samples where he can. Clementine nips at petals and vines and anything colorful - Techno has to hold her back from the more dangerous ones. And then they move on.

~\*~

"Our original route was kind of a mess, wasn't it?" Wilbur says as they rest at a small town's only inn for the night. "We spent, like, at least 2 weeks over land."

"We couldn't have gotten away with leaving via ship from L'Manberg's harbor," Phil points out. He takes another sip of tea and scrunches his eyebrows, trying to recall the memories. "But yes, we did fly over the Manifold Mountains at some point, and cross into Physere, and then spend a few days in a taiga forest, and *then* fly to the coastline and towards Novixl."

"I'm not flying over a mountain range again," Tommy immediately says. His hands reach to pet Clementine, slumbering away on his lap.

"Of course we're not," Phil says. They couldn't, even if they tried - the lack of mobility for Wilbur's crippled leg still remains, which makes long-distance flying far too dangerous. "To be honest, I only thought about an ocean crossing mid-way through the mountain crossing. My main destination at the time had just been to get you all *away* from L'Manberg."

"The next major port city is Shirestead, 20 leagues away from here," Techno says. He taps their map again. "It'll be 2 days by horseback, but there will be a ship we can pay to take us to Novixl."

"There should be people willing to sell us horses here," Wilbur hums. "We could probably get most of the money back once we sell the horses before boarding."

"Sounds good," Phil says. He downs the rest of his tea. "Well, I'm going to turn in for the night."

Every day, the thought of home draws him closer.

~\*~

"This horse really hates you," Tommy comments as the creature beneath Wilbur tries to buck him off for the 4th time.

"It'll come around," Wilbur hisses, jerking the reins back.

The horse did not, in fact, come around. Phil eventually switches rides with Wilbur.

Tommy trots his own horse beside him with barely concealed laughter for the rest of the day, Clementine draped over the large mare's back in front of him.

~\*~

“Hey, what’s - ow!” Wilbur shakes the still flopping minnow off his face and scowls at Techno.  
“What was that for?”

“You looked lonely. Found you a new wife.”

“Oh, fuck you-”

~\*~

“You actually like these?” Wilbur whispers, incredulous.

Tommy pops another fried cricket in his mouth and grins, teeth sharper than they were before.

“That’s not even the worst of it,” Techno says grimly. “Have you seen Phil?”

Wilbur turns just in time to see Phil shake the entire bag of crickets down his throat, Clementine snapping her jaws around the few that escape towards the floor below.

~\*~

They reach Shirestead, and they sell the horses.

There will always been people hitching rides to new horizons. With enough wealth display, it’s not difficult to find a captain and crew willing to indulge.

With a few pounds of gold, a messenger ship suddenly gains 4 new passengers and a floofy dog.

~\*~

“I remember, when I was very young and first inhaled the Overworld air, that I wanted to study the ocean for a living,” Techno muses. “Dreams change-”

Tommy snorts. Techno gives him a pointed look.

“Dreams change, and this one certain has, but - you know, since you can theoretically morph into a form that could explore underwater...”

“I’d have to learn how to shape and maintain that form first,” Tommy says, craning his head down towards the parting waters below, storm-gray and splashing up the hull like spilled watercolor. “But yeah, of course I’ll help with your weird obsessions. Just don’t sneak potatoes in our dinner soup.”

Techno laughs, softly. “Alright. I was getting a bit sick of them myself, to be honest.”

Tommy snorts. “You’re 2 years too late.”

~\*~

“We stopped here last time too, I think,” Wilbur says as they step into the inn.

“We did,” Techno says as Phil approaches the reception.

The woman there looks up. “Hello - oh, Phil! It feels like it’s been years!”

Vixella, isn't it? Wilbur vaguely recalls that last encounter.

"That's because it has, Vixella," Phil laughs.

"Oh - ah, silly me." Vixella blinks once, twice, and shakes her head a bit, as though ridding herself of a phantom itch. Then she perks up. "Oh, and your sons are still with you! They look dashing as always."

"This is the second time we've met," Techno says. Vixella merely waves it off, and leaves the desk to stride over.

"A large room for the night," Phil says. "Our ship's just stopped here for a day to restock on supplies, and I want to sleep on something solid."

"Of course, of course," Vixella says. "Come along - I'm sure we can find a nice place for you four to stay."

"Us and Clementine," Tommy clarifies.

Clementine is sniffing at a nearby potted plant - Wilbur nudges her away before she decides to take a bite out of it.

~\*~

The ship they're on also has a dog, trained to deliver messages and catch rats. Her name is Jesse. She's black as midnight, quick to turn and quicker to snarl at strangers, and Clementine is absolutely infatuated with her.

"Dude," Tommy says as he watches Clementine try and fail, once again, to get Jesse to respond to any of her attentions. "This is getting a bit sad."

A tail flick? Jesse ignores her. A lick across the muzzle? Jesse ignores her. A friendly nip to the shoulder, as an invitation to play? Jesse straight up walks off.

"I can't believe we have to watch Clementine struggle to get a date," Wilbur says with a poorly concealed chuckle.

"You're one to talk," Tommy says, leaning down as Clementine slinks towards them with ears drooping. "There's a million potential dates around us for you and all you have to do is cast a fishing line."

His eyes suddenly widen. "Wait. Clementine's never been around another dog for a long period of time, has she? Oh no. What if she really wants a girlfriend and we've just been depriving her of love interests this entire time?"

Wilbur's face twists into a mildly disturbed expression. "That is... actually kind of likely. Huh."

Tommy finds a dead rat outside his cabin's door the next morning, freshly killed. Clementine races past him from her bed of blankets and sniffs at it eagerly for a good 10 minutes before scooping it up with her teeth and trotting off.

Great. Here's to hoping they don't get a complaint from any of the crew members.

~\*~

It's a little bit of luck that Phil manages to find who he's looking for. They're only stopping at this city for a day, and he had heard an offhand rumor a while earlier-

And now, he's seat across a poker table from the only other one of his kind to live in the Overworld. That either of them know of, anyways. Recently acquainted.

More importantly, he's seated across from the only person - or representative of a group - that he knows has a steady supply of totems of undying.

How the Hermits managed to automate creation for the things, he has no idea, and he does wonder what poor species they're killing en masse to harness the death magic from. But that's not the point of today.

"So how many totems are you willing to sell?" he asks.

"About as many as you can buy, really," Grian shrugs. "More diamonds are always nice. Though, ever since Doc made that tunnel bore, I quite frankly think doing business for most gems or minerals has become obsolete."

Phil warily eyes the poker chips scattered like raindrops of color between them.

"Sorry, I'm on a strict no-gambling policy," Grian says. "The others will revoke my business privileges."

With an eye roll, Phil reaches into the ender chest beside him and pulls out a sack of diamonds.

"One each?" he asks. "You guys can absolutely afford it."

Grian laughs. "Yeah, absolutely. Impulse is kind of desperate for people to use them, actually."

He places a totem on the table - it's in the form of a thick gold wire, easily bended. It seems they've stopped bothering with the decorations, treating what was once considered a mysterious, powerful, and dedicated artform as easily as paper origami.

Then he places another totem, and another, and another-

Phil leaves the casino with 15 lives cradled in his hands. Anyone who actually goes through 15 totems will probably end up dead anyways; that much death-related magic is not something to be trifled with. Any body, human or not, can only withstand so much.

But he'd far rather have the precaution.

He also leaves with a business card in his pocket, and Grian's laughing "*shop with us again!*" ringing far too long in his mind.

~\*~

Clementine is still whining after Jesse. Dead rats on Tommy's cabin door are now a daily occurrence. The captain apologizes profusely once he finds this out, but it does not stop Jesse from the odd behavior.

Tommy catches them eating a rat together one day. Fucking gross, but okay. However canine dating works, works?

Techno confirms, later, that this is in fact not how canine dating works. Which makes this all extra weird. But whatever, as long as Tommy doesn't find dead rats on his bed.

Clementine knows better than to let that happen. Especially after that one incident in her puppyhood which resulted in... well. The chickens got to learn what rabbit meat tasted like that day, so at least it was a win for them.

~\*~

Oh fucking gods he's waking up to 2 rats at his doorstep now.

~\*~

"You think you'll ever go back to tournaments again?"

Techno slides another piece, and takes an elephant piece from the opposition. Wilbur curses.

"Maybe," he says, not taking his eyes off the board. He's not as familiar with Kinoko chess compared to the more widespread Larkensal version, and there's a few untested strategies he's pondering for this game.

"It's just - I know you like winning and being good at stuff," Wilbur says. "I don't want... I don't want you to feel like those things have been ruined for you."

*It's a natural part of many people to be competitive.*

"I have you guys, and I have peace, and I have my research," Techno says. "What else could I ask for?"

Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Are those not the qualities they have clawed back into their possession so determinedly?

"We've got it good, yeah," Wilbur says quietly. He moves his piece - cannon, across the grid. "I'm just saying, that there are aspects of what you used to do that you did enjoy. You like being the best at things, and that's not always a bad thing."

"I know," Techno hums as he inches a soldier forth one grid space. It's been periodically advancing towards the general since the beginning. "I'd like to stay away from the orphan murder for at least a few more years, though. It's a bit too late to be remorseful, I'm not boxing myself into violence anymore. I have to shake that previous mindset."

Not as much to not always react with violence, but to realize that no one else *expects* him to react with it either.

He's clawing free of the Blood God persona, and he'd like to keep it that way.

"But that doesn't mean you have to stay away from... *all* of it. There are plenty of non-fatal tournaments, or purely movement-related competitions." Another move by Wilbur. The second, to block the soldier's way.

"I know. I-" Techno sighs. "One day, probably. I've already got that record in Sanctuary I still have to break. It's..."

"You understand the concept," Wilbur says.

“Yes. I do.” He advances a cavalry.

It’s not that he has suddenly developed a hatred towards competitions, but...

“It’s just too soon,” he says finally. “A few more years, Wilbur, alright? We have plenty of time ahead of us.”

Wilbur smiles gently in reply, and his soldier consumes Techno’s general whole.

His side is lost, wholly given. Techno sighs again, smiles back, and clears the board.

~\*~

The shores of Sanctuary is a welcome sight. It had not been one of the ship’s original destinations, but that was nothing a few emeralds couldn’t fix.

Someone’s replaced the pierwood. It’s sturdier beneath them, far less salt-worn, a paler brown like newly shaved sawdust. They step onto the docks beneath a cloudy sky, darkening.

Clementine races onto the stony beach and Jesse tried to race after her, only for the captain to catch her by the scruff. They’re joined by Clementine again, a moment later.

“Say you goodbyes,” Tommy chirps cheerfully as he grabs Clementine by the scruff as well and begins dragging her away again.

“Now that’s animal cruelty,” Wilbur comments as Clementine whines and thrashes in Tommy’s grip, even as the ship’s planks are withdrawn and Jesse is hauled out of sight.

“She’ll get over it.” Tommy shrugs. He kicks at a stray clump of seaweed, and nods towards the distant lights of Sanctuary. “Come on. Let’s find shelter before the rain hits.”

“Snow.”

“Huh?”

Techno gestures around them. “There’s snow on the ground.”

There is, indeed, snow on the ground. Quite a bit of snow on the ground. Enough to cover the vast majority of everything, more frequent as they draw further and further away from the ocean. It was luck that the water itself had not been frozen, in which case they would have had to use elytras for the final stretch.

Tommy rolls his eyes. “Then we should hurry the fuck up even more.”

~\*~

Clementine stops whining and thrashing half-way there. She trots sullenly through increasingly thick snow beside Tommy, posture low. Wilbur resists the urge to laugh.

“You think she’d feel better if I knitted her a Jesse-lookalike companion?” Techno asks.

~\*~

Hbomb opens his door, groans, and slams it shut again.



It's opened to let them in a few seconds later.

## Chapter End Notes

ImpulseSV made a raid farm in Hermitcraft Season 7 that produced hundreds of totems in an hour. The hardest part about his operation was actually convincing people they were worth buying. Docm77 also made one in Season 6.

Yes they're fucking insane and yes, they did indeed commit mass genocide of pillagers (and i mean if Techno I-commit-terrorism-on-nations-for-a-living is a person then pillagers should be too? they have societies and crossbows so eh.)

also i asked some discord people if clementine should have a lesbian romance subplot and they said yes

# serenity is a state of mind

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The flight up the mountain is familiar; more familiar than Tommy would have expected, given how long they've been away. Icy wind greets their ascent, makes slippery their steps over the canal bridge and to the white stretches around their home. Hoofprints cross before their porch, recently made - mountain goats.

"I have no idea how you guys manage living here in the winter," Hbomb mutters as he stumbles up to join them at the front door. "It was hard enough just making a weekly check."

"It's easier with more people," Phil says. He undoes the lock, pushes the frost-stained door inwards, and steps inside.

Their house is silent, and cold, and casted with old shadows. But everything is there - furniture, fireplace, games and books and woodblocks still half-scattered. Gleaming shapes of enchanted netherite shovels lie placidly in one corner. The paper cranes Techno had hung around the living room edges, pointed greens and blues in their frozen spins.

"I never encountered any problem, so I just dusted stuff once in a while," Hbomb says. He pauses. "Well, a raccoon made its home in the winter chicken coop at one point, but that's about it."

"What the fuck is a raccoon?" Tommy asks before Phil can get in a word.

Hbomb gives him a perplexed look.

"Pyserne doesn't have those," Techno says. "They're small omnivorous animals - the habitat range usually doesn't include places with as high an elevation as this. Annoying little things."

"Kind of cute, though," Wilbur muses softly.

"And why were they in our house?" Tommy asks, frowning a little.

"Probably just decided it was good shelter." Hbomb nods towards the far side of the living room, where a door leads to the small extra chicken coop set up last winter so the animals would be more protected from the warmth. "I drove it out, but it did make a bit of a mess over there."

"It's fine," Phil says. "We have plenty of time to clean up."

A weight brushes past his leg - Clementine, already padding into the house while sniffing the couches with interest.

"Well, I'm going to get my room comfortable again," Tommy says, stepping in after her.

"Yeah. Sooner this place is warm, the better." Wilbur nudges Phil's shoulder, briefly, and disappears into the direction of his room as well. His cane makes no discernable noise on the dark fur rugs.

"Guess I'll get firewood," Techno says with a shuffle.

Phil turns to smile at Hbomb as he feels Techno leave his side. "Let Scott know we'll pick up the chickens tomorrow, assuming it doesn't snow all day. Thanks for keeping things in check for us."

"It's no problem," Hbomb says. He bites his lip, eyes suddenly caught hesitant. A question restrained?

"Yes?" Phil asks.

"Ranboo... he was alright, wasn't he? Settin' back in as First Lady?"

"About as alright as you could reasonably expect him to be," Phil says.

He thinks back to the weight he had seen drag at Ranboo's movements, how quickly the schooled expressions had returned in the few short days they had been in New L'Manberg. The way Ranboo now walks like the world is always judging with a thousand pairs of eyes in every precarious moment.

It's a very different kind of danger than what Phil is used to, but it is a danger all the same.

"He's strong enough to survive it," Phil says quietly. "We've assured this before. He has many supportive allies."

"Yeah." Hbomb presses a mittened hand to his cheek. "I've started exchanging letters with him too. I hope my words help, somehow."

"I know Tommy will be writing," Phil says. The rest of them will likely include their own additions as well. It'll help greatly to have an escape from the routine.

"He'll understand. And appreciate it." Hbomb nods. He turns back towards Sanctuary far below, with its speckled colors and firelight. "We'll always have a space for him here if he returns, just as you and your family have a place here as well."

Phil nods in turn, and then startles a bit when a hand rests on his shoulder.

A solid weight, grounding, and soft despite it all. It feels nice. It feels like he belongs, truly - with friends who will chat, and family already bickering faintly from the back rooms, and the world at peace with the silence and stillness and serenity.

~\*~

Firewood is placed, lit. More lanterns are set, more candles, the windows slit open and chimneys ensured clear. Clementine whines in distress when she reaches the winter coop, which Tommy and Wilbur then spend several hours cleaning up and preparing for the chickens.

Their beds are clean and warm and fluffed with pillows and patterned blankets by the end of the day, and the next morning Phil and Techno get to work on breakfast. Rabbit stew, glazed carrots, some wild greens Techno had gathered.

Phil then flies down to Sanctuary to pick up their chickens. When they see him, they stop squawking and pecking at each other for once to stare, and he likes to think they actually look happy.

That happiness lasts only until he picks up Crickett and Mack, on each hand, and retreats from coophouse to Lizzie and Scott's giggling laughter in the background. He'll come back for the rest later; he can only carry so many chickens.

The chickens don't seem to realize that. The rest peck and claw and dive at his legs until he manages to close the fence gate on them.

Well, at least Clementine will be home to keep them in line.

~\*~

They remain up in the mountains for the next week, readjusting everything back to their liking and clearing out the last pesky bits of dust Hbomb hadn't gotten in his sweeps. The snow around the house's immediate vicinity is cleared, and Techno spends a day doing nothing but chopping firewood.

Rather quickly, everything feels like home again.

~\*~

"Techno! You're back!"

"We've been back for a while," Techno says.

"Really? We wouldn't know, with how you've all been holed up in that little mountain cabin the entire time."

"That 'little mountain cabin' is twice the size of your house, Scott," Hbomb snorts.

"Alas, I am a lonely man." Scott twirls to face Wilbur. "We just wrapped up a campaign, actually. You alright to DM the next one?"

Wilbur grins. "Oh, I can't fucking wait."

Techno tenses.

"And," he continues slinging an arm tight around Techno. "My brother is joining us this time!"

"Which one?" Scott asks, but the smiling edge in his voice tells how much he already knows.

"Wilbur bullied me into this," Techno mutters, to which Wilbur merely waves a hand.

"First gathering will be tomorrow evening at Hbomb's place! Don't miss it!"

~\*~

In the campaign, Techno ends up the only survivor of an early ambush. He subsequently resurrects Scott, Pete, Phil, and Hbomb as his necromancy-bound minions. Wilbur thinks he looks inordinately pleased with this turn of events.

~\*~

"Tommy?"

The voice is familiar. But...

"Pearl?"

"The one and only."

Pearl seats herself beside him, and casts her gaze over the ocean. Tommy wonders how much discomfort she's hiding - it had taken him several minutes to feel the icy cold of the bench beneath fade away. The waters below have frozen over the past few days - now it is all still streaks of blue and gray and white, like an endless sculpture half-painted.

"You left," Tommy says. "For better things."

He knows, he understands - New L'Manberg is different, but they both had felt the dissatisfaction, the longing, made the decision to risk it all for a place that might feel more like home.

"I did. And I found those better things." Pearl closes her eyes, and inhales deeply. Almost a thin whistle. "It doesn't mean everything here was bad, though. I have good memories, and people I care about. I miss this ocean, frozen as it is, and the mountains that protect us. Why would I not visit?"

Tommy reaches to brush a finger against the compass hug around his neck. He doesn't wear it often, but sometimes when the skies are ashen with latent snow and coldness tugs against his throat, he will press it close and revel in the enchantment-powered warmth.

"Well, it's good to see you," he says. "I hope you have a good time."

~\*~

When they return home that day, Tommy takes several mugs and jars from the kitchen. Whittled wood and spun glass and clay-molded pottery, all set neatly on the porch steps. He fills them with dirt, and carefully pats into the fresh beds the new seeds he had collected back in New L'Manberg. Then he transports them one by one back into the house.

Phil smiles when he sees the new rows of windowsill decoration. Wilbur and Techno take to helping him water them.

~\*~

Wind draws the forest to rustling dances, small tides waving, rushing, static in motion and time. a time Techno has come to love and loves still, this feeling poured and retaken with the return.

"This place is fucking weird, you know," Wilbur says. "When you think about it. Really."

"It's called having naturally high levels of latent environmental energy," Techno says. "Certainly makes enchanting easier."

"Among other things," Tommy says. He kneels into the snow, plunges a bare hand through, and when he rises again there is a single acorn cradled in one palm. "You think the chickens would be able to crack this?"

"Definitely," Wilbur says immediately. "My bet's on Soot."

"Obviously you would pick the one *you* named," Tommy scoffs. He tilts his head for a moment, thinking. "I think it'll be Mack."

"Joy," Techno says. "She's the only one who would distance herself from the squabbling long enough to actually spend enough time trying to crack an acorn."

"You wanna bet on it?" Wilbur asks, raising an eyebrow.

“Fuck no.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Cowards,” Wilbur laughs. He flicks cane, and a trail of loose snow crosses into Techno’s hair. Sunlight sparkles off them, strangely familiar.

Techno scowls at him.

“You can’t snowball me,” Wilbur defends. “I’m a disabled man. Woe is my pitiful nature.”

“I will tie your leg to that cane.”

“Well, my father will hear about this-”

“Shh, you two. We’re here.”

Techno and Wilbur blink, and break off their bickering to join Tommy beside the clearing’s edge. Nothing disturbs the crown of snow but light pawsteps, that of some wild fox, and a few way-blown twigs.

“You think they’ll grow back when spring comes?” Tommy asks.

Wilbur tilts his head closer to him. “Mooblooms rebloom from their bulbs, yeah. And they did last year - with more flowers, too.”

“We might have to keep track of that, actually,” Techno muses. “Don’t want an invasive species taking over everything.”

“They grew a lot better than I expected, for this climate,” Tommy murmurs. He rests a hand on the snow for a moment, and when he rises there is left only a soft, indistinguishable handprint. His form blurs.

“We can always find more, if something ever happens to them,” Wilbur says quietly. “We’ll help you protect them however we can.”

“I know.” Tommy turns back to them. He holds a hand against his chest, the other half-way towards reaching for them. Techno rises back to full height; then he crosses a step and takes it, and pulls Tommy up as well.

“Is there anything you want us to do?” he asks. Tommy shakes his head.

“I just wanted to see it,” he says. “Since we have the time, you know. But let’s go back before we freeze our asses off.”

Techno complies, turning them to the path without another word. Wilbur heaves himself up and falls in step with Tommy; he quickly begins making more casual conversation, which is met with soft giggles.

The forest in their dance, in their timeless motion, rustles on.

~\*~

*Tubbo,*

*We're back at home! No offense, I like it a lot better here than at New L'Manberg. It's just... nice. I didn't realize how much I missed the forests and mountains, and while I don't know the people of Sanctuary as well as Wilbur or Phil, I like to say I'm friends with a few as well. Especially more recently, when I've felt more comfortable reaching out.*

*That's the real point, isn't it? I feel so much more comfortable with everything here, without politics or wars or stupid green bitches breathing down my neck. It feels fucking amazing. It's really hard to describe but... remember how I had a lot of trouble making friends, or engaging in social interactions back when we were in L'Manberg? I won't say it's all perfect now, because of course it's not, but it's so much calmer. Slower, but in a good way. Life doesn't seem like it's dragging every awful thing it can claw by me anymore.*

*I've just been happier. Plain and simple. Even on a mere physical level, it's easier - our location on a huge ass mountain protects from most monsters and the canals block out the rest. Phil even has plans drafted with Techno to automate some of the crop watering, as if we need more free time.*

*Life has mostly gone back to everything I've already described to you before. Again, I know New L'Manberg is important, but one day you should really, really come see it.*

*I hope things work out between you, Ranboo, and the rest of the cabinet and parliament. And Dream - if he's continuing to be a bitch, let me know, okay? I've got an address. I can send him a bomb or poisoned muffins, or something. It probably won't kill him and cause an international incident.*

*By the way - when you write back, let me know how Ranboo's doing. Obviously I'm writing a letter to him as well, but we all know your 9/10 husband is missing a point for unreliableness. If his memory problems get worse, you know where to ship him off to. (That was only partially a joke. I do miss Ranboo. Let him know that.)*

*Remember when I cornered Dream like the big and powerful man I am and made him explain a bunch of stuff? He says our powers are like... expectation based. Like I have to think about what I want to look like and expect it to happen, and most of the fine control comes from trial and error and practice. Didn't want to make a scene on the ship, but I finally tried it the other day with Phil watching.*

*I managed to get and retain that form Dream showed me. Our "true" form, apparently, when we're not directing that ability for anything. Can't see or hear or taste shit in it, so it's mostly useless for everyday stuff. I think the only sense I have while like that is some sort of... heat signature thing? Like I could feel where heat was around me in a general vicinity. Fucking weird.*

*Phil told me I looked weird as hell too. Rude. But then he let me slime(?) my way around his shoulders, and the warmth was really nice. And he helped freak Techno and Wilbur out when they walked in on me acting as his new scarf. So I guess all is forgiven.*

*I still can't believe my true form is a shapeless white blob. How am I supposed to become Great Friends with all the women now, Tubbo?*

*That was a question. Give me advice.*

*Anyway, I've been practicing other points around the ability too. I can now extend my arms long enough to hug both you and Ranboo at the same time without flopping over.*

*And that's about it. That I can consistently do. I'm working on other stuff, though, like just overall getting bigger or smaller, or squeezing through narrow spaces, but it's fucking hard. Things don't stick to a shape the way they're supposed to.*

*Of course I asked to study Phil's wings so I could try to copy them and actually fly as well. Unfortunately, he says most of the flight ability in End avians is powered by a similar kind of levitation-related magic to what shulkers have, and the physical wings themselves are more for steering. So even if I did make myself wings, stupid physics says I wouldn't be able to fly with them. At least, not if I copy Phil's body design.*

*But, morphing into some kind of bird would work! Dream says completely changing our physical composition, like trying to copy other animals, is the hardest stuff to do and took him a few decades to fully figure out. I will achieve what he did far sooner, because I am so much more awesome than he is. Obviously.*

*Speaking of people I am more awesome than, Techno and Wilbur are working on an ant enclosure and trying to make sure the things won't be able to escape. They have this whole plan figured out for going out to capture new queen ants in the spring and yadda yadda, a bunch of insect observation stuff.*

*The potted flowers I have around the windowsills are way more interesting. I might start a flower shop in Sanctuary. Who knows. There's no one around there with the job - people just go and pick flowers from the community garden/park/watch-Techno-and-Pete-duke-out-parkour center, or venture into the wild. But around here are only native flowers - I brought back a lot more species from Pyserne. Techno does say I should be careful to not scatter too many seeds with them outside, though - invasive species and all that jazz. It's a work in progress. I don't think any of the ones I have could spread in this climate too easily, if at all, but precautions for something as important as this can't hurt.*

*Fuck, Tubbo. Every time I think ahead into the future, I'm always struck by so much time we have. The tranquility of these mountains and valleys are something I've come to appreciate. Maybe even love and call home, though don't let Wilbur know I wrote that. He'll go on and on with "awww Tommy, I'll cry" and all that shit. It's funny to see Wilbur crying, but then he... likes it. He sheds all the tears and then doesn't stop because he thinks it's funny to giggle while crying and hugging me. It does get a bit old, having a 26 year old grown ass man clinging to you for 3 hours.*

*He'll just find another excuse to do it anyway, but it's the thought that counts. Like I said, we have more than enough time for it - and at least it's him and not Clementine slobbering all over me.*

*Actually, wait. Clementine might be better. She's been whining about other dog-to-dog contact ever since I broke her up with her ex-girlfriend. Oh boy, that was the funniest thing. We should find a playmate for her, though. Might be time to adopt another dog. That'll certainly make Techno happy...*

~\*~

Blizzards leave no distinction and no mercy for their onslaught. This time it swallows forth quickly, like a passing raptor's shadow, and stays its welcome for as long as it wishes.

Wilbur, through some distinction or another, has always had the best sense for weather events; at least in the Overworld. By the time a world of white darkness envelopes the reality beyond their burnished walls and windows, they're all curled by the blazing declaration of the fireplace, legs buried deep into wolf-fur rugs.



A small end table of dark oak, newly furnished by Phil, sits between them all. Clementine basks in the warmth beneath it, snoring. On the table is a large plate of sauced turkey pieces, dressed greens all slightly curled, and a small, mostly-eaten loaf of bread. A knife with crumbs still caught on its serrated silver edge rests beside it.

Dinner was a few hours ago; Tommy had woken the house when he tripped in his attempt to sneak a midnight snack, and now they're all pressed against each other like this, like so many times before. None of them had felt like going back to sleep - besides Techno, who is already dozing off against Tommy's shoulder.

Phil is silent, content to finish off the turkey pieces with Tommy, when Wilbur raises his head slightly with a lashed blink.

"What would a ghost version of me be like?"

Phil swallows his bite of turkey. "Why?"

Wilbur shrugs. "Everyone kept mistaking me for a ghost back in New L'Manberg. It's probably just expectations, but..." he frowns, glancing at Tommy's slumping, drowsy form. "I just wonder. If maybe there's a bit more to it."

Phil sets his fork down beside the knife.

"Wilbur. We'd much rather have you, and love you, than any ghost who might have taken your place." He leans against the table slightly, careful not to jostle Tommy or Techno. "Ghosts are incomplete, not just in body, but in mind as well. That's why people sometimes would rather see them. They're *easier*."

Phil turns to stare him in the eyes. "I could have killed you, and maybe dealt with a potential ghost of you. A version of you who would have been that kind of easier, would have raised less questions. But I can never call myself any kind of father if I would ever choose the easy option over the one that would save my son."

A rustle beside.

"Good talk," Tommy mumbles. "I agree. Right, Tech?"

"Not about the father part," Techno sighs, eyes still sealed shut. "Everything else, yes."

Phil laces an arm around Wilbur. Wings curtain them all.

"We will never know some of these things, Wilbur," Phil says softly. "A ghost probably wouldn't have formed anyway, even if you did die that day. It's alright to speculate sometimes, but... always remember that we love you for who you are and who you work to be. No dismissed alternate realities will ever call that into question."

"I know," Wilbur says. A hand reaches and grasps Phil's. His eyes flicker dark in the firelight, like shadowed petals flowering into the wind.

Then they close, and a symphony glassed behind is swallowed into the silence.

wowww okay. this is basically the final chapter. say your goodbyes here and save extra goodbyes for (hopefully tomorrow). that's an epilogue. idk how i feel about this finally being over after so long.

anyway, here's my [twitch](#). like i said, celebration + wrapping things up stream coming soon! if you're in the discord you can go into roles and click a role that'll notify you when i go live

[tumblr](#) and [twitter](#) for questions and art, as usual!

## epilogue (we shall enter that place no longer)

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The tornado towers like a pillar of basalt above the hills, gray and green with debris of the howling prairie. If he had not lowered himself into this abandoned warren and only dared squint his vision through the coyote-sized hole, he might now have been among the forsaken sacrifices this force of nature has taken without prior demand.

“Is it slowing down?” his companion asks, perking up, voice dampened by the wild winds and soft moss of their shelter.

“Nope,” Techno says, stepping back down to level. He fits his cloak of dark green tighter around his shoulders and trods a few steps through grass carpeting to lean down besides Fruit. “Still throwing a tantrum.”

“Sky’s been circled half by the sun,” another of the warren’s occupants groans. “Don’t think even the seniors remember such a fierce tornado-”

The gaggle of people beyond them, huddled like a blur of dark color, erupts into whispering. Men, women, children - a few of a prairie settlement who had sought shelter here as well.

Techno begins a breathing exercise and tries not to feel more like an outsider than he already does. Fruit pats his shoulder consolingly.

“We’ll fly homeward east once this blows over. Maybe then I’ll finally see this home you sound so wistful about all the time.”

“Yeah. Maybe,” Techno says, though he doubts he’ll show Fruit the path up the mountain.

Phil had been on a trip away in Kinoko, and Wilbur visiting a southern city with Tommy, when Fruit first passed by Sanctuary, defeated Techno’s hard-earned record of the parkour course in 3 tries, and stayed for a several days sparring with Techno - leaving the entire town bemused and Techno himself despairing over all his supposed accomplishments for the next few days.

Fruit definitely won most of their matches. Turns out, not constantly battling for several years leaves someone out of practice. Who knew?

By luck, Techno met him again during this solo exploration of Novixl’s interior prairies - and now they’ve been traveling together for nearly six months.

There’s far more to explore and observe here than what six months can offer, but Fruit had never intended on staying long and Techno would like to come back with at least another of his family for anything more detailed. So, with an ender chest stuffed full of specimens and journals of detailed notes and sketches, and Fruit having left behind a rather awestruck-reputation among the various cities, nations, wandering nomadic clans they’ve encountered, it is indeed about time to head home.

By this point, Techno can trust Fruit a decent amount. As much as he can trust Sanctuary’s general populace, anyway. To not stab him in his sleep, steal all his money and run off, sacrifice his life in a cult ritual - that sort of thing.

At any rate, they're both explorers with a thirst for something new. And, even given how Techno's in the equation, they get along surprisingly well.

"You wanna try the northern or southern pass?" Techno asks. They're the 2 air routes over the mountains that are most friendly towards elytra usage, and they both have their ups and downs (quite literally, too).

Fruit taps the dirt behind him, a stray root quivering. The rhythm regulars out after a few seconds, and Techno finds himself anchoring to it amidst the conversation of strangers around them, all shoved into hiding by the tornado's common destruction.

"They'll take about the same time in this season," he says. "I don't mind. There's places I want to go in either way."

"Northern it is, then," Techno says. It'll bring them significantly closer to Sanctuary - and thus, home.

Fruit nods, though his eyes are now peered towards the warren's dim opening.

"Let's eat here," he says, switching to Twitieric instead of the localized language they've learned, so none of the other shivering refugees will realize they have food and beset them for it. He pulls Techno further into their corner and turns them to face the dirt walls. "There's few places around here we'll be able to stay at anyways, so when the tornado quiets we'll leave immediately."

Techno hums agreement, and reaches into his pack to search for a wrapping of jerky.

~\*~

A cliff of mountain rises tall before them, implacable. Stone blurs in patterns of irregular lines, like a tornado of ash frozen in historic preservation. Who knows - perhaps in its ancient days, this slab of the mountain was indeed clawed by one such fury.

Dark forest crawls to the base, reached up as though pleading, as is so common in the valleys of the upper Western Mountains. The trickle of spring water is ever-present as well, lipping over burbles, tiny static, filmed with the faint but constant buzz of newly molted insects.

There is a small semi-circle along the cliff's sheer sink to the ground, moss-edged, where the trees have been cut. Cut, and the stumps blackened, hacked away, ground scarred deep into the dirt and stone like a palace's construction breaking in foundation, but in the lone, lone wilds flung far from the civilized society. Chunks of dirt are strewn about this clear like giant tortoises overturned on their shells and struck dead.

It had taken a good 2 days to dig up the tree roots. But now, they've reached the even more precarious part.

"How many pounds do you think we'll need?"

Wilbur does some quick math. "At least 4 hundred."

"Hard rock?"

"Mostly granite," Wilbur says with a wince. He had spent a while testing samples to check this area's minerals. "Unless you want to spend a month mining it out?"

“Dynamite it is,” Phil agrees.

Wilbur has already drafted the meticulous plans for how this to-be-blown-up-and-carved section of their base will shape.

“That’ll be tomorrow. Let’s go back for now,” Wilbur says. Phil nods, and helps steady the cane in Wilbur’s sweat-stained hands.

Around 3 years into living on the mountain bordering Sanctuary, Phil’s drive to turn his home into something *bigger*, something *secure*, kicked in. He’s not unfamiliar with it - in his years living in the Overworld, he’s built up and subsequently abandoned several bases, most with decades or centuries of work behind them. It was only a matter of time before this one befell the same fate.

He’s still not sure whether it is a thing all End avians experience - those End cities are long-abandoned now, but he knows each were once the work of only a few who flocked together - or if he simply has a strong instinct to build. Construct. But it is there nonetheless.

It started with a large cave carved from the side of their ravine basement, for more storage - especially for potion ingredients. Another one, with a tunnel connected to an underground water reserve, to function as an alternate water source.

Then he began mining tunnels. One to Sanctuary's garden. One to the ocean, just behind the loose gravel of the beach. One towards the depths of the mountain valleys, the hearts of the range, further west - this serves as more of an emergency escape than anything else.

It’s been 7 years since then - 10 in total since they left New L’Manberg that very first time. Phil eventually agreed to stop mining more - so now they have a ravine, several large caves branching off that ravine, and a few tunnels leading to various destinations. Phil originally created one twisting a few miles to the northwest - now, they’ve agreed on one to go southwest. Hence, their operations here.

Once they reach a space clearer of trees than its surrounding and spacious enough for Phil’s wings to stretch, he takes Wilbur into a carry in his arms and lifts off. After 10 years, his arm muscles have gotten surprisingly used to toting around an entire body.

Wilbur, meanwhile, has gotten surprisingly used to gazing around the clouds with only mere curiosity. There is not a hint of fear or apprehension at their height or gaining speed, not since the first few years.

They reach the house soon enough - 15 minutes flight or so, maybe a bit more. Tommy is sprawled on a large porch chair when bladed grass bends beneath Phil’s boots before him, and then beneath Wilbur’s lying weight.

“You’re late,” Tommy says, glancing up, and Wilbur is struck by the voluminous grin of his face. “Ranboo and Tubbo’s ship arrived an hour ago. They’re inside right now.”

Phil, who had been sliding Wilbur’s cane out of the ender chest to hand him, nearly drops it back in again.

~\*~

“How does retirement feel?” Wilbur asks.

“Fucking amazing,” Tubbo sighs into his pillow. “Also, these blankets are softer than the ones we had in the White House.”

“They’re made with a less well known tanning technique of Novixl.” Wilbur lowers himself into a chair. The room they had set up for Ranboo and Tubbo is the same size as the others, built as an entirely new extension from the living room as soon as they had received word that Tubbo has officially ended his term as president and is now headed towards Sanctuary.

There’s 2 beds in the room, one on either side, though there’s latches on their bedposts to join them together if Ranboo or Tubbo feel like it. Small end tables, a larger desk in the corner, a bookshelf and 2 chairs and soft rugs that fill most of the empty space left over, enough for a bit of light pacing.

Phil and Tommy enlarged and separated their room into 2 a long while ago; both prefer the privacy, and hold different styles of organization and decor.

Techno and Wilbur have continued to share.

Even after all this time, Wilbur doesn’t feel truly safe at night, asleep, unless one of his family is in the room with him. He doesn’t think that’ll ever change.

“Maybe I’ll get into tanning as a hobby then,” Tubbo says, pushing himself upright again. He slides down and nearly trips on an open case, half-filled with unpacked items.

“Really?”

Tubbo pauses. “Nope. No interest.”

“I figured.” Wilbur raps on the open door with his cane, steel on wood for a light *ting*. “Phil’s making dinner, so be in the kitchen in 30 minutes. Or now, if you want a say in what we’re eating.”

“I’ll finish unpacking first,” Tubbo says. “Ranboo’s there, right?”

“Yep.”

Tubbo’s shoulders relax - Wilbur hadn’t realized how tense they’d been. “He’ll make sure there’s nothing horrible. I’m a bit tired of telling people what I want for dinner, to be honest.”

“Gotta shake off the last bits of presidential habit, huh?” Wilbur stretches. “I bet Quackity’s having a great time right now.”

“To be honest, I’m not even that mad he won the next election. He won’t burn the country down like some of the other idiots that called themselves candidates.” A frown fleets across Tubbo’s face. “I do wish it had been Niki, though. Now she’s back in Essempy as diplomat.”

“You’re worrying over presidential matters again.”

“Oh, right!” Another deep breath. “I told you to stop me if I did that, yeah. Guess I’ll just focus on unpacking for now.”

Tubbo laughs, sheepish, though it sounds a little forced. That can and will be changed with some time, though. It is the nature of this life they now share.

“Have fun sorting out your stuff!” Wilbur chirps as he saunters back out the doorway, which is met with a subsequent despairing groan.

“Techno?”

“Hello, Hbomb,” Techno says. He pulls off his boots, throws them on the mat, and walks 3 steps to slump onto the couch with his elytra still on.

“Wow.” Hbomb raises an eyebrow. “Even inner Novixl couldn’t kill you, huh?”

“Technoblade never dies.” He sets about brushing the last of the dandelion seeds off his pants. “Anything terrible happen around here while I was gone?”

“Nope! And actually-” Hbomb’s grin splits wide. “Ranboo’s here again! Permanently this time - or at least, a lot more permanently than before. Tubbo Underscore is here too.”

“Tubbo and Ranboo are here? Tubbo’s quit the presidency?”

Techno blinks. 10 years, and of course the one time something like this happens, he was gone for all of it.

It’s been a long 10 years for New L’Manberg and Tubbo, undoubtedly.

“Yep! They’re at your place right now, actually.” Hbomb waves towards the mountain’s direction, the effect of which is greatly diminished by the wall of brick in the way.

“Tubbo Underscore?” Fruit asks, finally closing the door and taking off his boots as well. “As in, President of New L’Manberg Tubbo Underscore? And his husband Ranboo Underscore?”

He sounds surprised. Fruit is rarely surprised by anything, so Techno treasures this as a win - it’s a kind not often given out.

He’s still not sure how much he can trust Fruit, though - the original intent had been to introduce him to Phil and Wilbur in Sanctuary, and pass this place off as a general home. But this complicates things a bit.

Unless. Techno just voices his concerns like a normal human being. Fruit would understand.

On the other hand, he really hates talking about feelings like a normal human being. A truly horrifying task he rarely engages with for anyone outside his family.

“Uh - yeah. I sort of know them,” Techno says, trying his best not to sound too awkward. “Family friends. Haha.”

Fruit shoots him an incredulous look. “You live on different continents.”

“Lived,” Techno and Hbomb correct at the same time.

“Point stands.”

“I’m well-traveled, just like you,” Techno fumbles. “I, uh - knew Tubbo before he became president.”

That’s probably about as much as he can say without giving away his involvement in the Pogtopia Rebellion. Thankfully, Fruitberries is not a prying man, so he merely nods with an expression still half-skeptical and turns to Hbomb.

“So,” he says. “Any places for a stranger to sleep in this tiny town? Preferably one where I won’t get rained on.”

“Anyone who defeats Techno’s 7-year record in 3 tries is no stranger,” Hbomb says, grinning back again. People around here do that a lot, Techno’s noted through the years.

“So that means...”

“If Techno vouches for you, you can take the spare bedroom in my house,” Hbomb offers. “If you help me out with my woodwork a bit, it’ll even be free of charge. Food and everything.”

“Work like?”

“Mostly chopping logs, strippin’ bark, some sandpaperin’. So I can take care of the finer stuff,” Hbomb explains. “It’ll be for as long as you’re here. But first, Techno?”

“He’s good, yeah,” Techno says. He turns to Fruit. “Please don’t steal something and run off with my credibility here, okay?”

“Nah. I’ll be good.” Fruit offers a hand to Hbomb. “Deal?”

“Deal,” Hbomb nods,, shaking. “How long do you think you’ll be here?”

“A few weeks to rest up, and then I’ll be back to wandering.”

“If I join you again so soon, my family will flay me,” Techno says. Just then, light peaks - he slits his eyes from the clouded red dusk of the sun pouring through the window.

“I should get back to my family now, actually,” he hurries. “Especially if Tubbo and Ranboo are here. Who’s the new president, by the way?”

“Quackity,” Hbomb says, as though the name is a curious new flavor he’s never tasted before.

Techno winces. Tubbo probably wasn’t happy about that. But from the sound of it, the election was won fair and square, and no one feels like committing a repeat of history right now. Not yet.

“Well.” Techno turns, reaches the front door, and pauses - for what reason, he can’t figure out.

“Bye, Techno!” Fruit calls, slicing the moment of hesitation. “See you - uh-”

“I’ll be here tomorrow.”

“Right! See you tomorrow!”

“Goodbye,” Techno says, perhaps a shade too soft - then he’s closing the door behind him, and trodding the path towards the forest.

Wilbur and Phil would like Fruit, he thinks, though they might faint from shock at the idea of him having made a friend first.

That... *is* what Fruit has become, right? A friend? Though they’ve never explicitly stated the idea to each other? Or maybe they’re *supposed* to confirm it first and they aren’t actually friends? But then, what are they? Techno doesn’t think casual acquaintances travel together for months on end. And



while they don't battle side by side - mostly because Techno hangs back and lets Fruit do all the stabbing, only getting involved as needed, which was very rarely, they...

He doesn't know. He should probably ask Wilbur.

Right. That sounds like a very good idea, actually. He'll consult Wilbur and deliberate on it afterwards. And either way, he should introduce Fruit to the rest of his family, though that's probably not a choice he makes so much as one he family will make, some time in a future months or years from now.

He wonders if Fruit will agree to becoming a cameo, or perhaps even side character in the *Origins* series. Wilbur handles most of the characterization in it, and he does an extremely fine job considering how many critics exalt over its virtues.

No one expected Whitelisted's surprise publication of fictional fantasy. It had started with merely one book, intended as a standalone and grown from a DND campaign.

That had been a fun explanation with the Karl Jacobs Publishing House. Not. For some reason, they were all extremely befuddled when he explained this one had a co-author going by the name of Minecraft.

Phil's last name isn't well known to the public, and so by extension Wilbur using it isn't the eyebrow raiser. It seemed like the concept of a *co-author* for Whitelisted had been the actual shock.

To this day, 6 years later, he doesn't understand why. Wilbur's explanations are still of no help.

More thoughts for another time.

When he reaches the edge of Sanctuary, Techno readies a rocket in his hands, and soon he's sailing amongst the winds once more.

~\*~

It takes another 2 years before Techno and Fruit, through various adventures, lead to finally climb the mountain of Techno's home.

The first thing Fruit zeroes in on when he steps into the house is the giant glass terrarium in the far corner, like 2 square meters of the dense wilderness had been plopped directly on the hardwood flooring. Thousands of ants, tiny and ghostly white, scurry across every leaf and rock and blooming multicolored flower.

Atop the glass are several more jars - some nursing various plants with a dark dirt layer, usually also inhabited by insects of some kind, and some with various levels of water tinged with algae-green. As he watches, something tiny and ribbon shaped zips through the liquid of a larger jar.

He's about to ask when he spots the tiny grizzly bear cub snoring on the armchair.

"That's Steve," Techno says, following his gaze. A rare smile breaks out. "He's my emotional support bear."

Fruit couldn't stop laughing for the next 5 minutes.

~\*~

*Missive to King Jay R. Finch and the Dream Kingdom Administration*

*1865, the Winter Solstice*

*As this assembly knows, I bear many titles and responsibilities to the Dream Kingdom, and have for the past two hundred years. In this time I have experienced much, and guided the Kingdom through times of both darkness and light.*

*Nearly every culture I have encountered has a phrase akin to "history repeats itself". It implies we are but actors succeeding a long line of actors, who merely, unwittingly or not, fill the roles of those who have come before. Wilbur Soot, ex-President and founder of New L'Manberg, once said: "The characters are not the story. The story houses the characters... we exist in a tumultuous world where we are constantly pushed, pulled, and shaped by the events around us, regardless of our inner philosophies."*

*Despite my lifespan so far, I have found no clear answer as to the level of merit this idea holds. I have seen much which favors it, and much which disproves. But, writing this, I do know one thing for certain - all actors must leave the stage eventually. There comes a time when a chapter must close, and perhaps a new one begins.*

*Please consider this my formal resignation letter for all offices, titles, rights, and attached responsibilities to and of the Dream Kingdom. By the time I have made this announcement public, I shall be in this land no more. Any property previously associated with my possession in Kingdom lands may be dealt with however the remaining governance sees fit.*

*I hereby wish you all happy endings and joyful roles. It has been an honor performing part in the history of such a beautiful and captivating nation.*

*Goodbye, audience,*

*Dream*

## Chapter End Notes

and it's done. wow. 70 chapters. when i started writing this, i never imagined it would ever get this long. i thought i would write 1k word chapters, and eventually fizzle out or lose interest after around chapter 20. valley of serenity - or vos, as i have come to affectionately know it as, was also originally intended to be much more episodic in nature. none of my original expectations for this fic, beyond that it would center around sbi, have happened (though, as an exception, the trip back to New L'Manberg was one of the few things already planned when i wrote the first chapter!). throughout the past 9 months, i have seen my writing quality soar and (my sanity tank).

there's a few people i'd like to give thanks to. the beta crew - Crickett, Mack, Soot, Joy, Rhyley - firstly.

the mod team on the [discord](#) - you guys know who you are. idk how y'all put up with the server, but all of you have read and probably typed more messages than me lol.

Jocelyn, to whom i based an entire human oc off of and restrained from killing - thank you for being the only person irl willing to discuss all manner of politics, economics, social theory, and world history with me.

and of course, every person who has commented, kudoed, or viewed this fic. without you valley of serenity would not have begun, would not have continued, and would not have finished. i hope i continue to write works which stirs thought and emotion, as is the nature of all good literature.

[VOD to wrap-up/celebration stream I did a while back.](#)

edit (though ive made a few): for those of you who really, *really* love worldbuilding... AP New L'Manberg History test! (modeled off the AP World History: Modern exam). unlike actual tests there's no reason to stress about it because it is literally just for fun for the worldbuilding nerds!)

also, this is not the last fic in this au! there are others, as can be seen. check out the other stuff on my profile <3 and if you feel like it, subscribe to my user? i definitely have a lot more sbi works in the planning stages. [tumblr](#) and [twitter](#) i have as well, sometimes with some additional content or as another way of notification.

again, thank you all!

Works inspired by this one

[Salt, Snow and Gunpowder](#) by [egg\\_cows](#)

[Hearts Born to Run](#) by [Hermitori](#)

[what's broken can be fixed, but my l'manburg is ruined](#) by [erebusxiv \(actualkylebroflovski\)](#)

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